

## *Besprekingen en aankondigingen*

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### **Emigrant, Traveler, and Soldier: István Radnai's Diary from Hungary to Sumatra and the Russian Front**

Pusztai, Gábor, ed. *Szumátrától az orosz frontig: Radnai István első világháborús naplója*. [From Sumatra to the Russian Front: The First World War Diary of István Radnai]. Debrecen: Print-Art, 2013.

A piece of travel writing, an emigrant account, a military memoir, a World War I eyewitness account, an autobiography; these are only some of the descriptive labels that could be attached to *From Sumatra to the Russian Front: The First World War Diary of István Radnai* edited by Gábor Pusztai and published by the Dutch Department at the University of Debrecen. The book offers valuable information from the perspective of all the listed vantage points, provides good reading both for scholars and anyone interested in the history of the World War I era, as well as fascinating stories related to contemporary emigration. This is not only the first ever full-length publication of István Radnai's unique diary (found in the Netherlands in 2001) but also offers insightful studies on contextualizing which enables us to understand Radnai's recollections of a Hungarian emigrant visiting a little-known region of the world (Sumatra) and then returning to Hungary to find himself embroiled in World War I, having to serve on the Russian Front.

The centenary of the First World War brought about numerous publications and conferences dealing with the heritage of the Great War.

This book, published in 2013, partly fits into this trend by making available an eyewitness account of the war. The fact that readers can get to know this complex document for the first time in its entirety makes the publication noteworthy in itself, but it offers more. The diary presents Radnai's experience not only as a Hungarian soldier but also as a Hungarian emigrant, in this way providing a unique primary document from the era. At the same time, the publication is more than just the edited version of the diary, since the detailed introduction goes far beyond dealing "only" with the Great War.

István Radnai (1893-1940) left Hungary with his cousin, László Székely, in 1914 looking for better opportunities abroad. The two unemployed young men might be considered typical emigrants of the era in terms of their reasons for leaving the mother country (primarily economic, looking for jobs) as well as their plans (trying to earn as much money as possible and return home to Hungary) but they were atypical in their choice of destination. During the period of New Immigration (from the 1870s to the First World War) the overwhelming majority of Hungarian emigrants went to the United States, yet these two chose to go to Sumatra which at the time was a Dutch colony, to try their luck as plantation workers and possible owners.

Radnai became disappointed due to the lack of actual opportunities and returned home relatively early (after five weeks). When he arrived he was "welcomed" by the news of the declaration of war and mobilization in Hungary and thus he soon found himself at the Russian front. The diary which he kept from 1914 to 1916 provides fascinating insights into Radnai's experience first as an emigrant and then as a soldier. The first part details the journey to Sumatra and back, the second introduces his experience at the front.

The diary, especially the first part, might be read and studied as a travelogue, since it reveals motivations and expectations of migrants (a special group of travelers), showcases constant comparisons between the self and the other, and stands as witness as to how Radnai copes with and tries to make sense of the unfamiliar. While a typical reader of travel accounts learns about foreign lands and little-known cultures, s/he also will learn just as much about the writers and their background. By reading Radnai's diary, we discover details of his journey, of contemporary Sumatra, of colonial society, and so forth, as well as of the Hungary of the time even if these are not explicitly discussed. Besides what is mentioned in the diary, there is also what the author left unaddressed (for example,

Pusztai notices, the lack of discussion of Natives that fits into the Dutch tradition of travel writing [21]). The second intriguing section illustrates the first-hand experience of soldiers thus providing primary source material for anyone interested in the Great War, focusing as it does not so much on military strategy or political decisions but on the actual war experience of common soldiers. I, therefore, recommend this diary to anyone interested not only in World War I itself but also in how people perceived events and their own role in them as well as in Hungarian economic, cultural, and social issues.

Gábor Pusztai's thorough introduction (close to 100 pages long) helps the reader understand the diary while explaining and contextualizing Radnai's recollections of the events, as well as his style and the various topics discussed. Pusztai discusses motivating factors for emigration, the effects of personal traits as well as social and cultural trends on the structure and writing of the diary. In addition we learn about Hungarian travel writing on the Dutch Indies, colonial literature, detailed information about Radnai and Székely, including the main events of their lives, circumstances of their decision to emigrate, as well as their experience abroad. Specifically the detailed description of the Dutch Indies and Deli ("a plantation paradise") helps clarify the choice of the two Hungarians while the editor's overview of Radnai's World War I experience, provides the reader with the necessary background. Pusztai shows how historical and cultural (including literary) trends of the time influenced the perceptions of the world, decisions of migrants, and the creation of the diary. This well-researched introduction could stand on its own.

*From Sumatra to the Russian Front: The First World War Diary of István Radnai* becomes an attractive primary source that should be compared to and contrasted with other migrant texts of the time and with other works of Hungarian travel writing, especially those that raise the issue of the identity of the writer. The diary is especially valuable focusing as it does on a relatively neglected region and being written by someone who did not come from a colonial power. Because the diary presents an alternative (European) point of view, it should also be published in other languages. The diary, together with the well-researched and clearly written introduction, is recommended as a fascinating document from the World War I era that presents an extensive insight into the challenges of the time.