

**Imre Kertész**  
**Excerpts from the Harriman Lecture**  
**October 21, 2004**



*Ivan Sanders and Imre Kertész.*

IK: *Fatelessness* really was prepared much earlier than there was any receptive attitude to it. It's a very interesting question. You know that in 1973 I actually submitted it to one of the Hungarian publishers and [it was] rejected very harshly, and I was thinking, "What the hell do I do? What the hell do I do with my book?" And I was thinking how could I smuggle it west? And then later on when the book didn't have to be smuggled but was actually published in the 1990s in the west, I realized that in 1973, the west itself would not have been receptive, accommodative enough, for the perspective, the philosophy, the whole atmosphere, the ambience of *Fatelessness* so it would have been rejected back then there.

IS: What is it in *Fatelessness* that would not have been commensurate back then?

IK: The very brutal, the very radical approach. You cannot write a Holocaust novel because you just simply cannot put the Holocaust into writing, you cannot incorporate it into novel. A real Holocaust novel should have been written from within the gas chambers. Of course, it's only a mere sentence, but the whole thing is difficult to approach linguistically, semantically.

IS: What is it that you actually want to write about or of the Holocaust?

IK: I never wanted to write about the Holocaust. I wanted to write about the feeling, the sensation of fatelessness, the loss of a personality, a destiny that incorporates the Holocaust, that incorporates German concentration camps, but also incorporates civilian everyday life back in Hungary; the life, the appreciation, the interpretation of his life is just impossible and unacceptable for the society, because by the time he comes back, the society has developed a language that will help interpret the whole experience: victims, survivors, etc. The whole experience doesn't allow my character to accept this.

IS: Let me say that for me perhaps the largest bravo in your book is that there is this novel written with very realistic tools, and a fourteen-year-old character who is completely convincing, the way he explains from the perspective of a fourteen-year-old. Of course, there is nothing

surprising in terms of what happens with him, because that is it: it's a fait accompli. It happened with many others also. However at the same time in this novel there is something that really is a cradle, a life philosophy; however, this is there, lurking in the book, but a cradle, a life philosophy, is not something a fourteen year old can actually articulate. You actually only allude to it, as a writer who of course has a mass of experience, and the real bravado is that there is no contradiction between the two. The novel itself is convincing; as you said, it's a teenager who can also read it, who can also understand it, yet all those lurking behind the façade are still there for the reader to discover. What I feel, and I would be very interested to hear your opinion, is it there in language? Is it hidden in the language? Because you said in any time the style of *Fatelessness* is not really your style; you actually invented a style and a language.

IK: Well, basically you're looking at three different problems when you have to write. It was the character, of course.... To what extent is it justifiable that I use a child? I never wanted readers to shed tears. The second is basically the theme, the topic, the activity. You alluded to it. It's completely normal and everyday-like and I really wanted to make it an everyday-like story where you are almost obliged to have certain acts and events from all the different sources of literature we had back then, memories and memoirs. So I really had to be scarce when it came to the action in the script, and I really wanted to go for things that have happened with everyone else all the way to the moment the character is saved and survives. In terms of language the real problem is how do you depict totalitarian things without actually using the perspective of totalitarianism. This character was extremely suitable for this because he was never brought up to be a Jew. He didn't know the relationship between himself and Jews. He didn't really understand the whole circumstance in which he finds himself. However, despite all this he understands that someone, not God, but some mortal power, defines him to be someone. He has to experience this being; he is forced into a situation, which he has to experience and live as if it were a completely logical series of events despite the fact that nothing is logical. So it is really this that language had to reflect. He actually has to go through the whole logic of the concentration camps, he has to understand – if you look at the book, every single moment of his life has to be interpreted this way or that way. Something that is absurd has to be interpreted as being logical. And I think that is pretty typical of the internal thinking of totalitarian regimes that's the way people think in a totalitarian regime, because this is the only way they can survive. Because they *have* to survive. If they don't understand, they perish. If they miss just one step that they take, they fall into the ravine. Language had to reflect this absurdity.

IS: What is your opinion about the quite frequently asked [question that in comparison to the huge literature on the Holocaust] the Soviet gulag has been forgotten. It's been asked of many important writers. Justifiable or not?

IK: Well, the gulag is so much different, Auschwitz has been documented, interpreted, we know everything about Auschwitz. There are Auschwitz journals: for example, in 1942, the third of May, what kind of transport was delivered there, what happened with the prisoners, what they did, how many people died, who they were and how many were exterminated. So everything is documented. It's all there on paper, it's there in the archives and it all depicts the horror of how it was at all possible for this camp to come into existence, while just beside it, civilian life was perhaps a bit hampered by the war, but this factory functioned for four years, without anyone trying to stop what was happening there. We have all the documentation, the papers, the mirror that is shown to us, about our life, the real face of humanity, collaboration, adaptation of people to the absurd ideas that prevailed, the whole impact that these absurd ideas had. It is a very

destructive document that is there, lurking. We have to investigate the gulag. We have to discover the gulag. It's equally as horrible but perhaps it's more of an Eastern European-Russian problem... . Despite all our horrors and everything we feel about it, still it hasn't been incorporated into European thinking and the European consensus, as the Holocaust has become a conceptual idea. The Holocaust has a very special culture, in music, in literature, in art. It has a political side to it, of which you can say that Western European states have come to a consensus about Auschwitz.

IS: [...] Let's go back to literature. As a literary translator, you also got close to the work of such congenial writers as Joseph Roth and Elias Canetti, as well as philosophers. You translated Nietzsche, Wittgenstein... . I never felt that these writers and philosophers had a direct influence on your writing beyond the fact that you also write philosophical novels in your own right. One writer you did not translate, but who nevertheless played an important role in your life, is Polish-born Tadeusz Borowski, whom you mentioned in your Nobel lecture, most probably because of the affinity that you have for him. I'm sure my colleagues in the Slavic department will be interested, what struck you about Borowski's stories, what effect did they have on you?

IK: I'll tell you very honestly, it had a delayed impact. He was published in Hungary somewhere around 1970. I wasn't very susceptible to any impact, because I was almost ready with my novel. I was about to write about my arrival to Birkenau. There was a soccer field: I wasn't sure if it was true, if I really correctly remembered it, and I went through all these books, all these documents about the death camps, about Birkenau. There was this document by two authors—*Death Factory*—and they didn't write about the soccer field. I didn't know how reliable my memories were. And then Tadeusz Borowski is published, I buy his book, *Ladies and Gentlemen, To the Gas Chamber This Way, Please*. It started by saying, "First of all, we built a soccer field." And that was my meeting with the notion of my memories, and I wrote my memories based on Borowski.

IS: In terms of the future of Eastern Europe, how optimistic is Imre Kertész?

IK: What's the difference between the optimist and the pessimist? The pessimist is better informed. How optimistic or pessimistic I am... . I really try and work on the basis of information, to have a realistic picture of life, and just wait and see what happens.