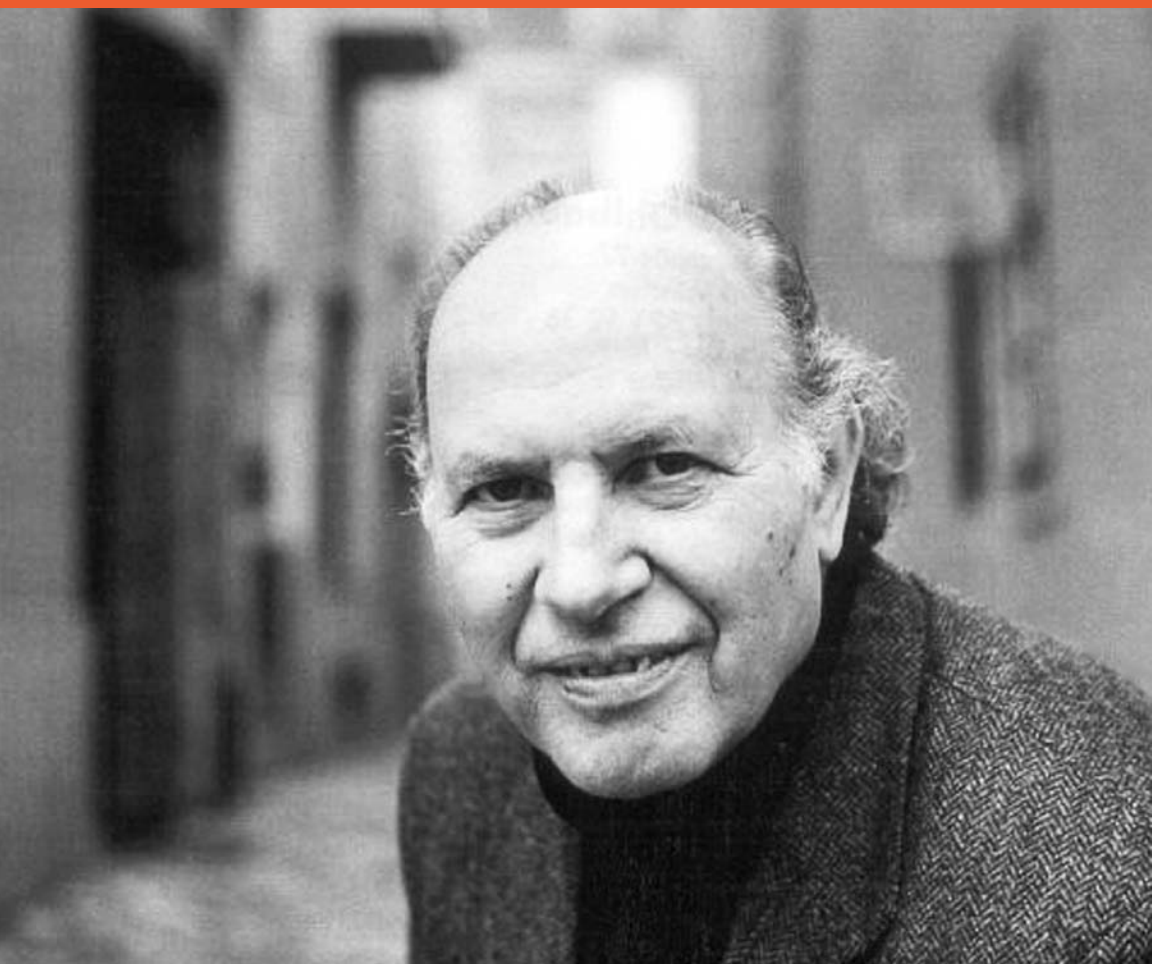




At the time Imre Kertész's first novel was rather quietly published, it would have taken a great leap of the imagination to predict that 27 years later the author would be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. The 2002 jury explained its choice by praising Kertész "for writing that upholds the fragile experience of the individual against the barbaric arbitrariness of history."

ANNA PORTER

Imre Kertész

Writing the Impossible Novel

"I can only write the one novel it is given me to write," the central character in Imre Kertész's novel Fiasco explains to a friend. The statement could apply as easily to Imre Kertész himself. He has written and continues to write the book he needs to write and wants others to read. It has appeared in different time frames, with the same central character at different times of his life, and always with the same core theme: the inescapable fact of the Holocaust. This simple historical truth ended Europe's illusion of its own civilization and, as Kertész explores in his fiction and non-fiction works, began the unforgiving era of survival.

 **T**HE Holocaust cannot be repaired, cannot be avenged, assuaged, or even understood. It is the complete moral failure of European society. All one can do, Kertész says, is to look it in the face and recognize it. In his own case, he was able to turn the experience into something positive: writing.

In Kertész's first novel, *Fatelessness* (1975), the protagonist is a 14-year-old boy who is rounded up with thousands of other equally surprised and uncomprehending Jews and transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Unlike most of his Hungarian fellow prisoners,

ANNA PORTER was born in Hungary. Her family fled after the 1956 revolution. Her last two books are *Kasztner's Train: The True Story of Rezso Kasztner, Unknown Hero of the Holocaust* and *The Ghosts of Europe: Journeys through Central Europe's Troubled Past and Uncertain Future* (Douglas & McIntyre). She has recently been writing about Central Europe for *Maclean's* and the *Globe and Mail*.



Budapest, 1944: Hungarian and German soldiers march arrested Jews through the streets.

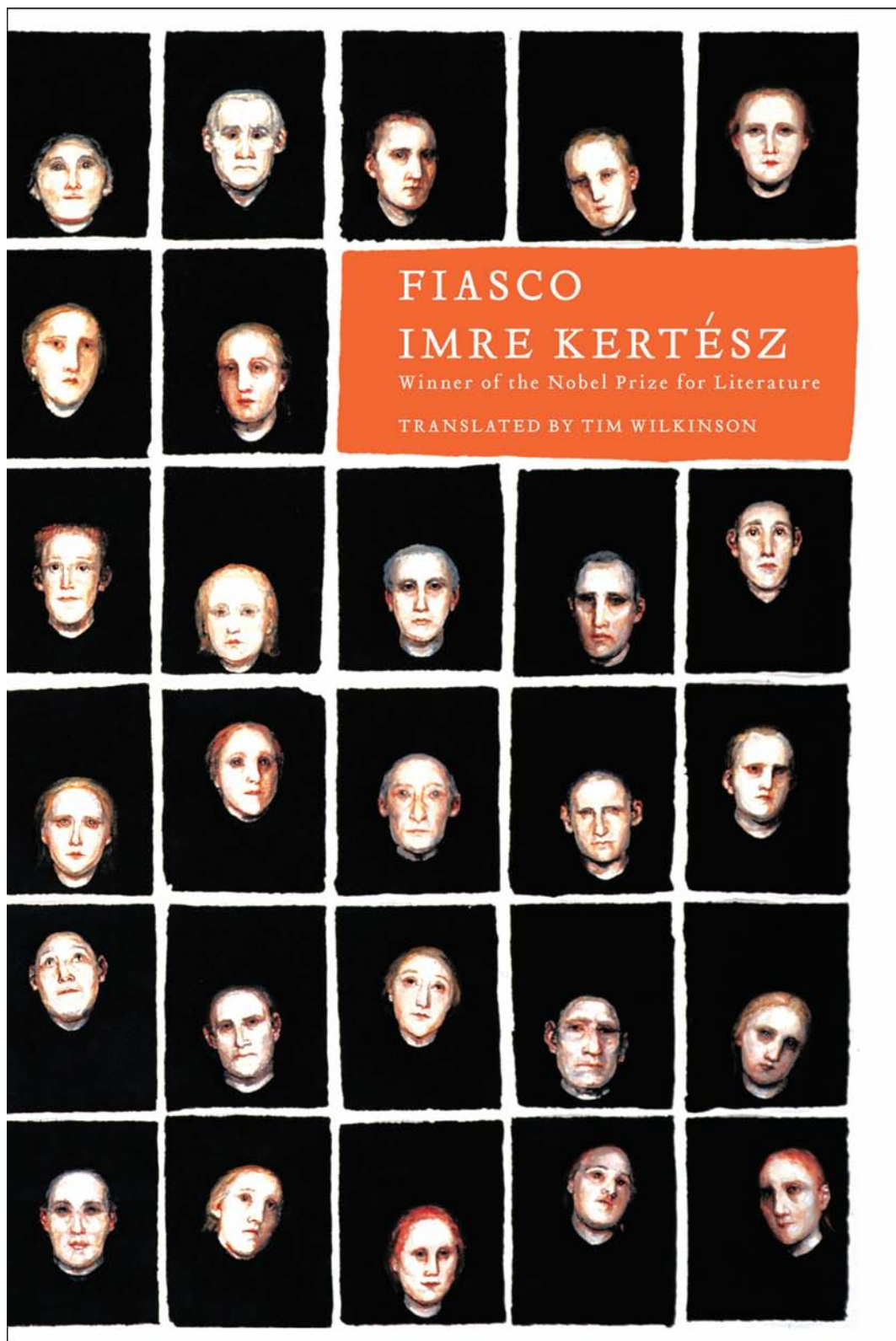
this boy is not murdered in the few hours after arrival on the railway platform – children and their mothers, older men and women, the sick and the frail were all processed for death by gassing – but becomes one of the nameless inmates who endure the daily cruelty, the starvation, the filth, and the misery of the concentration camp labourer. Also, unlike many other survivors, he remains baffled by the fact of his own Jewishness, a subject to which he has scarcely given a thought until here and now.

Young Köves survives both Auschwitz and Buchenwald. He neither knows nor understands why he is spared, as he had not understood why he was transported to a concentration camp as a Jew, when he neither felt like a Jew nor had any notion of what it meant to be a Jew. He was born into a secular family. All he knew of Jewishness was that he had to excel at junior school in order to continue to high school. Jews would not be allowed into the schools unless they stood at the top of their class. All he knew about being religious was that women

were bald, a fact impressed upon him by the chance encounter with an aunt adjusting her wig. “I assumed,” Kertész said, “that being a Jewish woman meant you had to be bald.”

IN the second novel of his trilogy of Köves works, *Fiasco* (1988), the boy is now grown up, and has decided he wants – needs – to be a writer who will recount the story of the boy in the camp. “... when I was fourteen and a half, through a series of infinitely inane circumstances, I found myself looking down the barrel of a loaded machine gun for half an hour. It is practically impossible to describe those circumstances in normal language.” Thus Kertész invents a language that serves to describe what he and his character have endured, because Kertész himself was a boy of fourteen and a half who barely survived the death camps and returned home to Hungary to become a writer. And Kertész himself, like the older Köves, supported himself with translations and writing musicals, while trying to work on the novels he needed to write. Kertész translated Nietzsche, Freud, Roth, Wittgenstein, Hofmannsthal, Canetti, and numerous other writers and philosophers into Hungarian. His translations have offered scholars grand opportunities for locating interesting connections between his novels and the philosophers, but I don’t think one needs to delve so deeply into his inspirations to find value in his fiction.

As the older Köves – he is referred to as “the old man” in *Fiasco* – he has no other trade or ambition than to be the writer who writes both *Fatelessness* and *Fiasco*. The Hungarian title of this latter book is “Failure,” a word that expresses more accurately the substance of the novel whose protagonist is desperately, anxiously, trying to write a novel because he is a writer, and writing is all he can do and what he must do. He searches for his novel ideas in an old grey file under a large grey rock and finds there the manuscript of the second part of the book: a novel named “Failure.” In this, a man returns to his homeland and finds himself the victim of the faceless, secretive dictatorship he had once left behind. The incomprehensible, pointless events that formed part of daily life here are still the expected reality. It is a nightmare in which the central character is “fateless,” unable even to guess why decisions about him are made, by whom and where. It is the concentration camp world where perpetrators and victims act out their roles without questions. Yet, here too, as one of the novel’s characters says, there is that small moment of decision when you can choose between being a perpetrator and a victim. It is in this absurd



FIASCO

IMRE KERTÉSZ

Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature

TRANSLATED BY TIM WILKINSON

world that he meets Berg, a writer who can start and end his books but not fill in the centre. Köves volunteers to do this one task.

HE language is ironic, distanced from the events and people it is describing. It was too neutral, too lacking in indignation, for the publisher who first considered the manuscript of *Fatelessness*, and thus the novel sat in Kertész's small apartment for some years until 1975 when it was first published, rather quietly, in Hungarian.

It would have taken a great leap of the imagination to predict that 27 years later Imre Kertész would be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. The 2002 jury explained its choice by praising Kertész "for writing that upholds the fragile experience of the individual against the barbaric arbitrariness of history."

By 2002, most of Kertész's fifteen novels had been translated into German – it was German writers who had proposed him for the prize – and various other languages, and he had become a celebrity on the literary scene. This did not spare him the astonished reaction of the international press (who is Imre Kertész?), nor the mixed reaction of his fellow Hungarians.

The great debate in Budapest's literary circles pitted those who had always been his admirers, and had already showered him with praise and prizes, against those who did not consider him to be sufficiently Hungarian. That viewpoint is, as Kertész has said, one of the reasons he chooses not to live in Hungary. It is a place where fascism can still be socially acceptable if it is shrouded in pleasant expressions. One journalist, for example, complained that Kertész was not writing in the tradition of the great Hungarian novelists (none of whom were Jewish). Some commentators accepted the honour of the Nobel Prize jury but expressed the hope that one day a "real," authentic, home-grown talent would win the prize. In this view, Imre Kertész – who was born in Budapest in 1929 and writes in Hungarian – was not sufficiently Hungarian.

Kertész shrugs at the critics' failure to label him. He does not think he belongs to Hungary. In a 2002 interview he described himself as a ghost, an alien, using a language that does not belong to him, nor does he belong to it. He explained: "The writer of the Holocaust is, indeed, in a difficult situation.... there is no language of the Holocaust and there cannot be one. The survivor in Europe is able to tell his/her story only in a European language, yet this language is not his/her language

"DARES TO AESTHETICIZE THE CONCENTRATION CAMP EXPERIENCE IN A MORE PROVOCATIVE MANNER THAN *SCHINDLER'S LIST*. A DARINGLY CRAFTED, DEEPLY AFFECTING WORK OF ART."

— Mark Peranson, *TORONTO GLOBE AND MAIL*

FATELESS

Directed By
LAJOS KOLTAI
Academy Award® Nominee

Screenplay Adaptation By Nobel Prize-Winner
IMRE KERTÉSZ
From His Celebrated First Novel

Original Score By
ENNIO MORRICONE
5 Time Academy Award® Nominee

YOU CAN CLOSE YOUR EYES. YOU CAN TURN AWAY.
BUT YOU WILL NEVER FORGET.

2 EUROPEAN FILM AWARD
Nominations
BEST COMPOSER
BEST CINEMATOGRAPHER

WINNER
BEST ACTOR
OFFICIAL OF THE JURY
LAJOS KOLTAI
Lajos Koltai (winner, "Nostalgia")

WINNER
BEST CINEMATOGRAPHER
Lajos Koltai (winner, "Nostalgia")

WINNER
AUDIENCE AWARD
Nominations (1st Prize, 2nd Prize, 3rd Prize)

WINNER
BEST FILM
Lajos Koltai (winner, "Nostalgia")

WINNER
GRAND PRIX, BEST SCREENPLAY
BEST ACTOR &
BEST CINEMATOGRAPHER
Lajos Koltai (winner, "Nostalgia")

Official Selection
BERLIN
1st Film Festival

Official Selection
TELLURIDE
1st Film Festival

Official Selection
TORONTO
1st Film Festival

Official Selection
CHICAGO
1st Film Festival

Official Selection
MILL VALLEY
1st Film Festival

Official Selection
EDINBURGH
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MELBOURNE
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RIO INT'L
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CO-PRODUCTION BY ANDRÁS HAMORI PRODUCTION A FILM BY LAJOS KOLTAI "FATELESS" MARCELL NAGY ABON DUMINY ANDRÁS M. KESKES JÚZSEF GYABRONKA ENDRE HARKANYI AND DANIEL CRAIG
EDITED BY HANNA SÓLLÓ H.S.E. TRAN SIMON KÁVE AMPS, CASI CSISZAR MICHELLE GYÖRGEY-SZÁVICS PRODUCTION DESIGNER TIBOR LAZAR COSTUME DESIGNER EGYA PRODUKS H.S.E.
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PRODUCED BY ANDRÁS HAMORI SCREENPLAY BY IMRE KERTÉSZ BASED ON HIS NOVEL SORTELANSÁG DIRECTED BY LAJOS KOLTAI

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Lajos Koltai's 2005 film *Fateless* is based on the Imre Kertész novel, with Marcell Nagy as the 14-year-old protagonist.

nor is it the language of the nation from which he/she borrowed it for his/her writing ...” As he sees it, the language of the people on whose behalf he accepted the Nobel Prize was used by those who labelled him a Jew, shoved him into a cattle car, and transported him to Auschwitz. He brushes aside the fact that those who had determined that he should be exterminated were Germans, because Germans have acknowledged their role in the Holocaust. Hungarians, he thinks, have not yet done so.

If he had to pick a literary tradition to belong to, ironically, it would be that of Kafka, Roth, Camus, all writers who created their own styles.

Kertész now lives in Berlin, a place he loves for its cultural cosmopolitanism, its myriad musical offerings, its opera houses and sidewalk cafes, as much as for the cheerful friendliness of its inhabitants. Adding to the national debates, in a 2009 *Die Welt* interview, he compares Budapest somewhat unfavourably to Berlin. In the same interview he talks of his persistent unease about his Jewishness, describing himself as an “unJewish Jew,” and he protests that he does not write Holocaust literature, he merely returns to the pivotal experience of his own life, which happens to be the Holocaust. “I am a professional writer. I delight in every successful sentence, every perfect word. I take pride in being an artist.”

The third book in the trilogy of novels, *Kaddish for a Child Not Born*, was first published in English in 1997. Its protagonist is also a

concentration camp survivor. The novel tells its stories in the form of a traditional prayer for the dead. At its heart is the question of whether life can continue through the birth of children, whether their existence can provide solace to the past. The resounding reply is no. It cannot. Yet the author's usual tone of irony and self-questioning leaves open the possibility of redemption from the hell of Auschwitz, even if the protagonist does not believe in it.

 KERTÉSZ'S short novel *Liquidation*, written after the collapse of communism, nevertheless inhabits that same soulless world familiar from the trilogy. The story concerns an Auschwitz survivor's suicide and its effect on friends and family. B, a celebrated author, neither explains nor excuses his final act of defiance. His suicide note – "Forgive Me! Good night!" – is short and almost cheerful. What follows is Kertész's dispassionate exploration of the responses to B's suicide, including that of B's publisher and literary executor who sets out to find B's missing (or is it?) manuscript, while the reader realizes that B has enjoyed an affair with his publisher's wife and, to add to the lifelike humour, his publisher has flirted openly with B's wife, who, in turn, has supplied the drugs that killed B.

"Without humour, "Kertész told me, "there is no literature." Despite the situations and subjects of his novels, in each one there are touches of comedy.

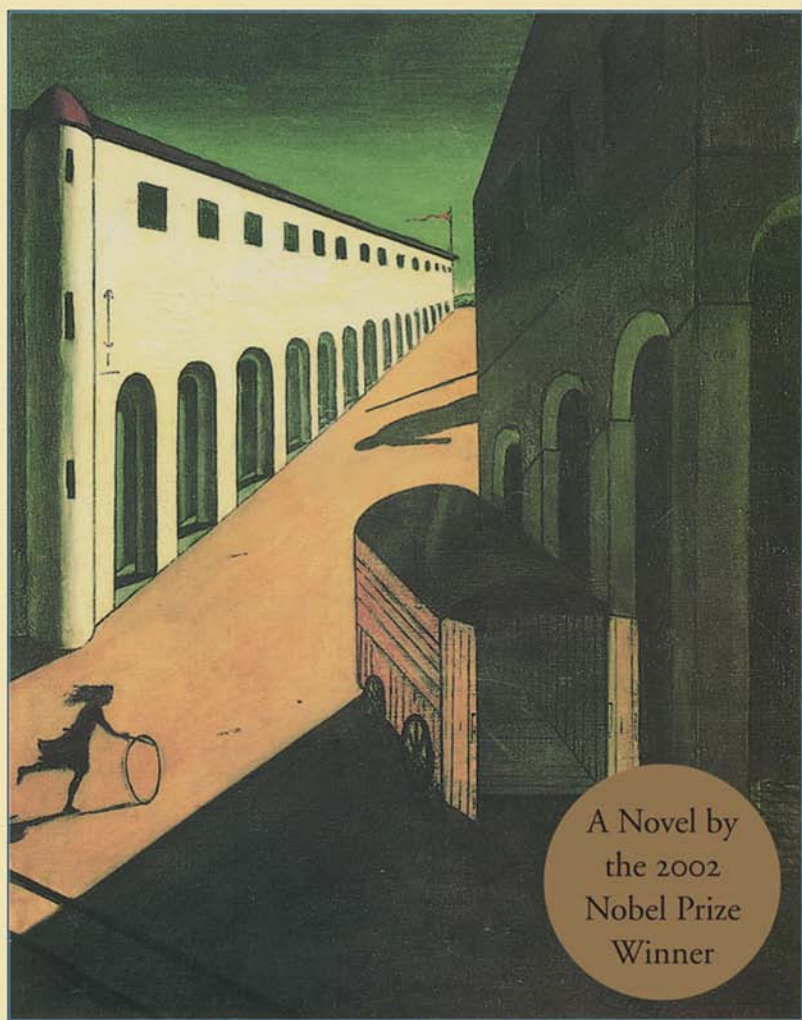
As always, the translations into English lagged behind the other languages, and even today some of Kertész's most interesting work remains unpublished in English. Thus *A Galley Slave's Diary*, essays written between 1961 and 1991, remains unread in English (the French edition was published this year). It is interesting for its meditation about why he thinks he has escaped the fate of other survivors who committed suicide – writers such as Paul Celan, Jean Améry, Primo Levi, all of whom he admires. Life under dictatorship in post-war central Europe meant he, unlike the others, did not suffer from failed expectations. He continued, almost seamlessly, from one tyranny into another.

In May 2011, when the *Globe and Mail* asked me to review Kertész's *Fiasco*, I called him in Berlin. I wanted to know why he decided to stay in Hungary at the end of 1956 when so many others escaped to the West following the Revolution.

FATELESS

Imre Kertész

*Translated by Christopher C. Wilson
and Katharina M. Wilson*



Kertész now lives in Berlin, a place he loves for its cultural cosmopolitanism, its myriad musical offerings, its opera houses and sidewalk cafes, as much as for the cheerful friendliness of its inhabitants.



“I stayed,” he said, “because I was still young, struggling with my style and the language I wanted to use for my writing. I could not have written my novels had I left.” He was 27 years old. His first novel had not yet been published. It was the knowledge that he must, using the one talent he had, bear witness to the Holocaust. It is the writing, the act of creation, that has transformed him from an object to a subject. Bearing witness empowers the once powerless, as he writes in *Fiasco*.

In 1992 he delivered a speech in Vienna in honour of Jean Améry. It was entitled “The Holocaust as Culture.” I asked him about his statement that some write out of revenge against the central fact of our age: Auschwitz. Kertész protested. His own writing was never revenge. “That would have been meaningless. Art, the art of writing, offers a metaphysical echo, a memorial to an inexpiable crime.”

I asked about the novels being forms of autobiography. He was adamant that while his novels do contain autobiographical elements, they are fiction in the traditional sense, if not the traditional form. Unlike *Life Is Beautiful* and Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* – “kitsch,” Kertész says – that present the upside or triumph of survival, “I see survival as a terrible trauma. The optimism is false. It is light pap for the public. We were beaten and degraded. We grew to accept the unacceptable.” In some ways, then, dying was easier than surviving.



After Kertész was awarded the Nobel Prize, the director of the Buchenwald Memorial Centre presented him with a copy of the daily report on prisoners, dated February 18, 1945. The report states that Kertész, “Prisoner #64,921, factory worker,” was among that day’s corpses.

OUR conversation was in Hungarian. In that language, when he mentions Köves, the man at the centre of his trilogy, it becomes obvious that he connects the name with “kö,” the word for “stone” in Hungarian. That, in turn, connects in the reader’s mind with the grey stone under which *Fiasco*’s “old man” finds the manuscript of *Fatelessness*, as well as the grey rock at Mauthausen concentration camp that the prisoners were ordered to climb until they died from exhaustion or were casually shot by the guards. It is reminiscent of the large rock that Sisyphus, in the ancient Greek tale, was condemned by the gods to roll uphill for eternity. Is it a flash of humour – or of hope – when Kertész says that unbeknownst to Sisyphus his efforts had reduced the stone to a pebble he could put into his pocket? Thus, perhaps writing, once an almost insurmountable burden, has become almost easy for Kertész. At the age of 83, he is master of his craft and of his art.

