

A Biography

Born in Kassa (Košice, now in the Slovak Republic) on 11 April 1900, Sándor Márai came from a family of Upper Hungary Saxons (a community of German descent). Between 1910 and 1917 he attended first the local school run by the Premonstratensians, then the Bishop's Catholic School in Budapest, and finally the Royal Catholic Grammar School at Eperjes (now Prešov). His first article appeared in 1916 in the newspaper *Pesti Hírlap* under the pseudonym Ákos Salamon. From 1918 he was a journalist at the newspaper *Magyarország* [*Hungary*], where he was a colleague of the writer Gyula Krúdy. His first volume of poetry, *Emlékkönyv* [*Book of Memories*], came out in 1918 in a hundred copies.

In 1919, at the time of the Bolshevik Republic of Councils, he worked for the newspaper *Vörös Lobogó* (*Red Flag*). In October he left for Germany via Prague. He enrolled at the *Institut für Zeitungskunde* (Institute for Newspaper Research) in Leipzig. He worked for *Drache* and various other German periodicals. From 1920 he travelled around Europe reporting for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* and the *Prager Tagblatt*. He also wrote for Hungarian newspapers. He studied in Berlin in 1921, but gave up as journalism and the exciting events taking place in Germany began to take up all his time. It was then that Franz Kafka attracted his attention, an author whom he would be the first to translate into Hungarian. In 1923 he married Ilona Matzner (the Lola of his writings) in a civil ceremony.

Between 1923 and 1928 he lived in Paris. His first novel, *The Butcher*, appeared at this time (1924). From this year he became a regular correspondent for the Budapest newspaper *Újság*. He made a lengthy trip to the Middle East in 1926, returning to Budapest in 1928, when he published his novel *Baby, or First Love*. In 1936 he became a columnist for the *Újság*, where several hundred of his articles appeared every year. His works became increasingly mature: *The Mutineers*

(1930), *Foreigners* (1931), *Confessions of a Bourgeois* (1934, 1935). This last, an autobiographical work, is one of the pinnacles of his literary career.

Between 1936 and 1944 he became well-known as a journalist at the *Pesti Hírlap*, and found himself at the centre of attention as one of the most popular writers in the country. In 1939 his son Kristóf was born; he died after only a few weeks. His Krúdy-inspired novel *Sindbad Returns Home* appeared in 1940, and his play *Adventure* was performed in the same year. It remained a popular favourite for years, running to 351 performances. His historical drama *The Citizens of Košice* was performed at the National Theatre of Budapest in 1942.

In Autumn 1948 he left the country with his wife and adopted son, János Babócsay. They lived first in Switzerland and then in Italy. He worked for Radio Free Europe from 1951 to 1967. His poem *Funeral Oration* and his novel *Peace in Ithaca* as well as his diaries reflected his state of mind at the time. He lived in New York from 1952. He followed the 1956 revolution closely, and commented on it in Radio Free Europe. He even left for Munich because of the events, but had to return home without reaching Hungary when news came of the crushing of the revolution.

From the end of 1967 to 1980 he lived in Salerno in Italy. The greatest achievements of this period are *A Memoir of Hungary* (1972), *Bracer* (1975) and *The Dolphin Looked Back* (1978), a collection of poems. In 1980 he moved to San Diego in California, where he lived until his death. His life was burdened by many losses: he lost both of his younger brothers, Gábor and the film director Géza Radványi, his wife Lola (1986) and then his adoptive son János (1987). His final work was *The Garrens* (1988).

On 21 February 1989 he committed suicide. His ashes were scattered in the Pacific Ocean.