A Guest in My Own Country: A Hungarian Life

George Konrad
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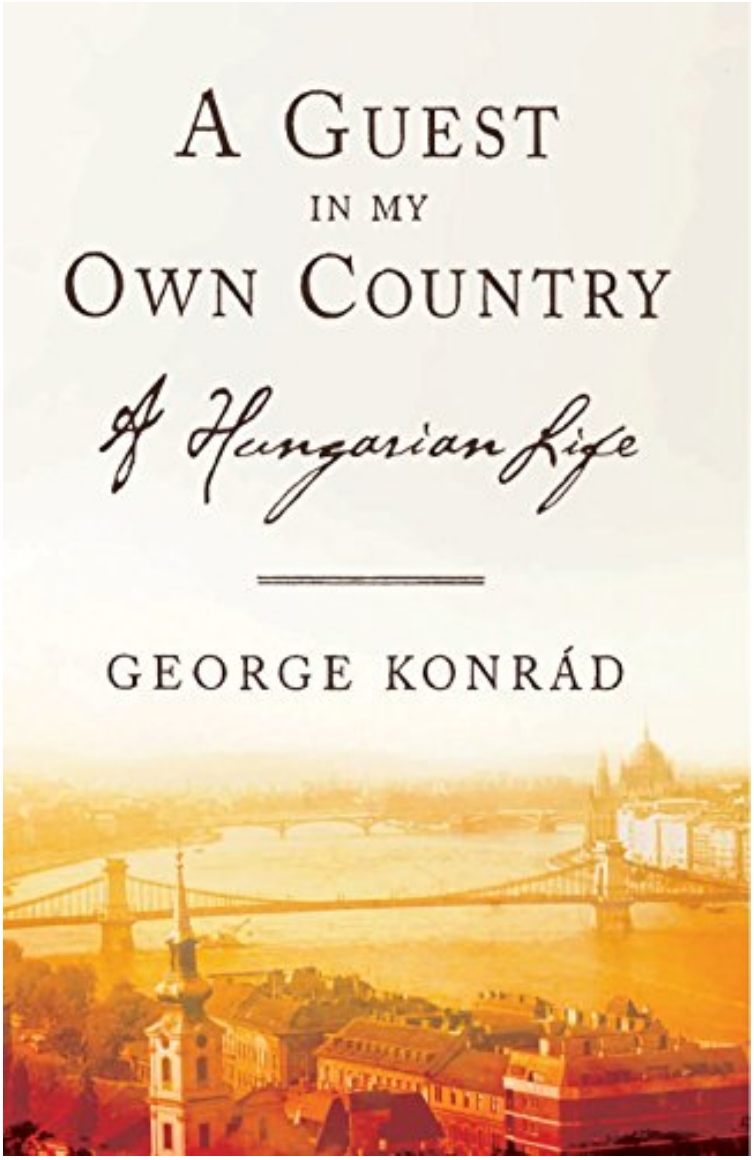

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George Konrad : A Guest in My Own Country: A Hungarian Life before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised A Guest in My Own Country: A Hungarian Life:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. I'd like to know more...By esther ratnerI am Hungarian myself and have become more interested in my origins as I grow older. My parents left Hungary in 1944 and immigrated to various countries so Konrad's memoir was a draw. The passages describing his early life until the end of the war are riveting. The post-war years left me wondering about who is this man until I came across a passage towards the end. "I

do not like being engulfed by the situation...I would rather look at it from the side or from above: I enjoy backing off and moving on." This pretty much sums up the memoir for me: great descriptions of events but where is he? I would have liked to get a better feel for the man himself: details of his first and second marriages; why these women and not others; his relationship to his sister with whom he underwent unimaginable experiences; his relationship to his children and his thoughts on their contemporary lives as compared to his youth. Konrad, where are you in all this turmoil, chaos, madness and lucky destiny? He answers some of these questions but I finished the book wanting more...If you are interested, however, in post-war Eastern Europe this is a must read.13 of 14 people found the following review helpful. Philo-storyBy hungarianjediWhile the book overall is an interesting read and quite insightful in some places, it is not always easy to follow and some readers may find it harder to read than others for several reasons.First, the book is a translation from the Hungarian and there are some grammatical errors and typos in the book, as well as some odd recurrences, in that people are almost always "shot dead" rather than simply "shot" or simply "dead"; nothing overly bothersome, but still noticeable and potentially annoying depending on the reader.Second, the book is divided into two parts, with each "part" divided into sectional bursts as short as one paragraph or as long as three or four-pages. These parts do not necessarily follow each other in terms of historical timeline or story. So if you are looking for a clear, linear, easy-to-follow, yet personal and descriptive, historical account of life from pre-WW2 to post-communist Hungary, you may find this book a bit hard to get through, and in some places down-right annoying!The book also gets more philosophical towards the end (more Ernest Hemingway-esque if you wish), with short reflective sentences in quick succession, like: "I dash out of the house into the meadow. You cannot see this spot from the village. I stop and turn around. The vast emptiness is refreshing - the surrounding hills, the ruins of a castle sacked three hundred years ago, the solitude. There is no one here in the bright noon light. It is no effort at all for me simply to be". Again, not a problem per se if you like that kind of writing or these kinds of books.The book is insightful in some parts, although I'm not sure what recounting some of his sexual adventures and thoughts brings to the story, other than a basic idea of `live and love life and the women in it, sleep with the pretty ones that are willing to sleep with you, and do not be tied down by marriage' (though he was married 3 times); a physical and intellectual coming-of-age and his related reflections on this transformation perhaps?Overall, I was expecting a more linear or sequential story of his life and adventures (maybe some chapters?!). His stories come through by the end, or as you piece them together yourself, but I found it to be a harder book to follow than necessary and not very well organized. Other than the parts where he describes his ordeals/adventures in Budapest as the remnants of the German Army are pushed back, I would not really label it a captivating page-turner, but still interesting enough to read from a later-in-life philosophical perspective.If you are not Hungarian, are planning to travel to Hungary, and/or wanted to get a bird's eye view of what Hungary or Hungarians are like as a people or culture, this may not be the book for you.On the product itself (the paperback edition), it has excellent quality binding and paper, with a crisp clear print in average-sized letters causing no eye strain. lists it as 352 pages, but the totality of the story is +/-300 pages.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy EB1Excellently written account of a varied life in Hungary before, during and after WWII.

Winner of the 2007 National Jewish Book Award in the category of Biography, Autobiography MemoirA powerful memoir of war, politics, literature, and family life by one of Europe's leading intellectuals.When George Konrad was a child of eleven, he, his sister, and two cousins managed to flee to Budapest from the Hungarian countryside the day before deportations swept through his home town. Ultimately, they were the only Jewish children of the town to survive the Holocaust.A Guest in My Own Country recalls the life of one of Eastern Europe's most accomplished modern writers, beginning with his survival during the final months of the war. Konrad captures the dangers, the hopes, the betrayals and courageous acts of the period through a series of carefully chosen episodes that occasionally border on the surreal (as when a dead German soldier begins to speak, attempting to justify his actions).The end of the war launches the young man on a remarkable career in letters and politics. Offering lively descriptions of both his private and public life in Budapest, New York, and Berlin, Konrad reflects insightfully on his role in the Hungarian Uprising, the notion of "internal emigration" the fate of many writers who, like Konrad, refused to leave the Eastern Bloc under socialism and other complexities of European identity. To read A Guest in My Own Country is to experience the recent history of East-Central Europe from the inside.

From Publishers WeeklyThis powerful, highly literary memoir by a world-famous authoressayist and novelist Konrd was elected president of International PEN in 1990discursively traces his life as a Hungarian child during the Holocaust, and later as a student during the Hungarian revolution of 1956. While it deals with his growth as an intellectual and writer, it is primarily a meditation on the conflicts between national and individual identity. Konrd's prose is distanced and unemotional, but always carries a potent punch: "In the winter of 194445 I saw any number of dead bodies. I could picture myself among them, but the tasks of day-to-day existence obscured most of my imaginings. Danger makes you practical." This cool, objective voice works as well for the smaller vignettes as it does when he is musing on Dr. Mengele's obsession with killing Jewish children. There are moments of almost surreal narrative herehis mother and father tell Konrd (b. 1933) and his sister bedtime "adventure stories" of how they

survived the warbut also moments of stately, traditional bildungsroman. His account of the 1956 revolution, in which he was an active participant, is equally laconic. This memoir stirs and provokes in unexpected ways that linger after it is read. (Apr. 24) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. Publishers Weekly This powerful, highly literary memoir by a world-famous author, essayist and novelist...discursively traces his life as a Hungarian child during the Holocaust, and later as a student during the Hungarian revolution of 1956. While it deals with his growth as an intellectual and writer, it is primarily a meditation on the conflicts between national and individual identity. Konrd's prose is distanced and unemotional, but always carries a potent punch...This cool, objective voice works as well for the smaller vignettes as it does when he is musing on Dr. Mengele's obsession with killing Jewish children. There are moments of almost surreal narrative herehis mother and father tell Konrd and his sister bedtime "adventure stories" of how they survived the warbut also moments of stately, traditional bildungsroman. His account of the 1956 revolution, in which he was an active participant, is equally laconic. This memoir stirs and provokes in unexpected ways that linger after it is read.Kirkus s Konrd's novelistic skills produce vivid, terse sketches of numerous relatives and acquaintances, and the book features dozens of heart-stopping perceptions.....a valuable and absorbing chronicle of a terrible ordeal and of the transcendent courage shown by both its survivors and its victims.The New Republic For many years and through diverse political systems, the writer George Konrd has served as one of Eastern Europes leading intellectuals, and can be rightly considered the living conscience of a deeply disturbed society....[A] fine and fascinating book.New York Times Book Alan Riding In the end, George Konrad was lucky. He alone among his Jewish classmates survived the Nazi occupation of Hungary. He joined the 1956 uprising against Communism and escaped arrest after it failed. And, later, as a dissident writer who was acclaimed abroad and banned at home, he avoided all but one short detention. When Communism finally expired in Eastern Europe in 1989, he was only 56, still young enough to enjoy another life. From 1990 to 1993 he was president of International PEN and from 1997 to 2003, president of the Academy of Arts in Berlin.This upbeat finale, which includes a third marriage and three more children joining an earlier son and daughter, is the prism through which Konrad recounts the past in his lively memoir, "A Guest in My Own Country." It is a story inescapably dominated by the Holocaust and a Communist dictatorship, but it is also very much a personal story, one in which tragedy, fear, resistance and tedium are accompanied by humor, mischief, successes and a good deal of skirt-chasing. It is also a story that Konrad can now tell with some detachment, knowing more or less how it ends. "Every life is better than no life; every life, including the pain that goes with it, is good," he writes. "True, getting through the daily grind is like wading through seaweed, but I can get through all sorts of things, therefore I am. And given the fact that I am alive, the question of why is as inane as fly droppings on a grape."Ably translated by Jim Tucker and edited by Michael Henry Heim, the book, which combines and abridges two volumes previously published in Hungary, has its idiosyncrasies, not least a chronology that bounces around. But it works. Along with his own comings and goings, Konrad offers touching family portraits and droll anecdotes as well as meaty reflections on life and literature. It is like listening to a charming old uncle reminiscing over dinner: he may be a bit hard to follow, but no one wants to interrupt him.The book's title can only be sardonic. What a way to treat a guest! Raised in the small town of Berettyoujfalu, Konrad was 11 when his parents were arrested by the Gestapo in May 1944. (They survived, although five of Konrad's cousins, five aunts and an uncle died.) All the town's Jewish residents were rounded up a month later, but the day before, Konrad and his sister had joined relatives in Budapest, where they hid until Soviet troops arrived. (They were among the few Jewish children from Berettyoujfalu to survive.)Returning to his hometown after the war, Konrad was told to write an essay called "Why I Love My Fatherland." He was puzzled: "What was I supposed to write? Things were far from simple. I believed my fatherland wanted to kill me." Yes he had had an image of the fatherland as "the good place," a place of safety and rootedness. "But once you have been driven from your home and observed your fellow countrymen accepting it (indeed, rejoicing in it) then you will never again feel at home as you once had."Once the Communists took over, Konrad had new reason to feel excluded: because his parents, who owned a store, were considered bourgeois, he faced obstacles to his education. Yet he opposed his parents' plan to migrate to Israel. After the 1956 uprising, he refused to follow many fellow intellectuals into exile; and after his arrest in 1974, he rejected an invitation to emigrate. For this, the unwanted guest paid a price: "Thus began the decade and a half of my life as a banned underground writer."His arrest and blacklisting came after the police found the manuscript for an essay called "Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power," which he wrote with Ivan Szelenyi. His first novel, "The Case Worker," based loosely on his job as a child welfare supervisor, had gained him some renown in Hungary, but his subsequent booksthe novels "The City Builder," "The Loser" and "A Feast in the Garden" (his most autobiographical book) and the nonfiction essay "Antipolitics"could be published only in secret or abroad. Still, the royalties kept him alive.Engagingly, Konrad casts himself as neither victim nor hero. "Too lazy and inept to handle the organization that went with the oppositional activities," he writes, "I did not get much involved, especially since political activism started early in the morningmy best time of daywhich I never would have considered giving up. I stuck to formulating and distributing antipolitical texts."In 1976, to his surprise, the regime allowed him to accept an academic position in Germany, but he went home two years later. "My feeling was that since I had started out as a Hungarian writer I might as well finish as one," he writes. And while he took up other posts abroad, he always returned to Hungary. In fact, in

the journey of this memoir, he does finally find peace there. "Home," he writes, "is in the middle of the Elizabeth Bridge, where, coming home from my travels, I murmur, 'How beautiful!'"International Herald Tribune ...[A Guest in My Own Country] is a story inescapably dominated by the Holocaust and a Communist dictatorship, but it is also very much a personal story, one in which tragedy, fear, resistance and tedium are accompanied by humor, mischief, successes and a good deal of skirt-chasing. It is also a story that Konrad can now tell with some detachment, knowing more or less how it ends. "Every life is better than no life; every life, including the pain that goes with it, is good," he writes. "True, getting through the daily grind is like wading through seaweed, but I can get through all sorts of things, therefore I am. And given the fact that I am alive, the question of why is as inane as fly droppings on a grape.Ably translated by Jim Tucker and edited by Michael Henry Heim, the book, which combines and abridges two volumes previously published in Hungary, has its idiosyncrasies, not least a chronology that bounces around. But it works. Konrad offers touching family portraits and droll anecdotes as well as meaty reflections on life and literature. The book's title can only be sardonic. What a way to treat a guest! Raised in the small town of Berettyoujfalu, Konrad was 11 when his parents were arrested by the Gestapo in May 1944. (They survived, although five of Konrad's cousins, five aunts and an uncle died.) All the town's Jewish residents were rounded up a month later, but the day before, Konrad and his sister had joined relatives in Budapest, where they hid until Soviet troops arrived. Returning to his hometown after the war, Konrad was told to write an essay called "Why I Love My Fatherland." He was puzzled: "What was I supposed to write? Things were far from simple. I believed my fatherland wanted to kill me." Yes, he had had an image of the fatherland as "the good place," a place of safety and rootedness. "But once you have been driven from your home and observed your fellow countrymen accepting it (indeed, rejoicing in it) then you will never again feel at home as you once had." Once the Communists took over, Konrad had new reason to feel excluded: because his parents, who owned a store, were considered bourgeois, he faced obstacles to his education. Yet he opposed his parents' plan to migrate to Israel. After the 1956 uprising, he refused to follow many fellow intellectuals into exile; and after his arrest in 1974, he rejected an invitation to emigrate. For this, the unwanted guest paid a price: "Thus began the decade and a half of my life as a banned underground writer." His arrest and blacklisting came after the police found the manuscript for an essay called "Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power," which he wrote with Ivan Szelenyi. His first novel, "The Case Worker," based loosely on his job as a child welfare supervisor, had gained him some renown in Hungary, but his subsequent books - the novels "The City Builder," "The Loser" and "A Feast in the Garden" (his most autobiographical book) and the nonfiction essay "Antipolitics" - could be published only in secret or abroad. Still, the royalties kept him alive. Engagingly, Konrad casts himself as neither victim nor hero. In 1976, to his surprise, the regime allowed him to accept an academic position in Germany, but he went home two years later. "My feeling was that since I had started out as a Hungarian writer I might as well finish as one," he writes.Foreward [A Guest in My Own Country is an] intellectually remarkable, emotionally inscrutable memoir.The Seattle Times Michael Upchurch [This] great Hungarian-Jewish writer ("A Feast in the Garden") recounts his boyhood escape from the Nazis, his role in the 1956 Hungarian uprising and much more, in a book that is harrowing yet shot through with a caustic, vivifying humor.About the AuthorGeorge KonradGeorge Konrad, a former president of International PEN and the Academy of Arts in Berlin, is the author of The Case Worker and The Invisible Voice, among many other widely translated books. He lives in Budapest.Michael Henry HeimMichael Henry Heim, a professor of Slavic languages and literature at the University of California at Los Angeles, has translated works by Anton Chekhov, Milan Kundera, and Bohumil Hrabal, among others.Jim TuckerJim Tucker, a classical philologist living in Budapest, translated works from German, French, and Italian before making the acquaintance of George Konrad for whom he has translated some 35 essays from the Hungarian, in addition to works by numerous other authors.