

Acceptance Speech by Andrea Petó

All European Academies Madame de Staël Prize for Cultural Values

in the context of the ALLEA General Assembly 2018

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European Commissioner Mariya Gabriel,

Professor Günter Stock,

Professor Luisa Passerini,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Many people were part of my journey to becoming the first Hungarian to accept this prestigious award. Among the most important ones is Professor Miglena Nikolchina of the Sofia University. During the twenty-seven years I spent at the Central European University in Budapest, Miglena Nikolchina was the most supportive department head I had the chance to work with. It is a pleasure that she is here in this historical chamber, rejoicing with me. There are many more people to whom I could extend my gratitude. In such a rare moment of success, it is crucial to remember that as women scientists we are standing on the shoulders of great women predecessors. Such a great woman predecessor was Madame de Staël. Yet, somehow she was omitted from the same literary and political canon which, throughout the past decades, has assembled Sappho, Toni Morrison, Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, Anna Akhmatova, and Emily Brontë. I have examined several university syllabi but found no trace of Madame de Staël's works. Although she had a significant literary oeuvre, her lived experiences, her "human qualities" mark her lasting legacy.

In the following, I will demonstrate the ways in which her oeuvre is still relevant for us today, as well as the consequences of her decades-long omission from the canon. I will do so by

juxtaposing the life of Anne Louise Germaine de Staël-Holstein, or Germaine – as I will from now on, almost intimately, address her in this speech –, with the life of Júlia Rajk. Júlia Rajk, my biography of whom is available in German and Bulgarian, was the wife of László Rajk, the Hungarian Minister of Interior Affairs executed during the country's first Stalinist show trial in 1949. Júlia was the one who ensured that László Rajk and his comrades would receive a proper reburial, after their bodies were hastily reposed in an unmarked grave in a forest near Budapest. This event became the grand rehearsal of the 1956 revolution. Júlia relentlessly fought against the murderer of her husband and of Prime Minister Imre Nagy. She established a civil organization, spoke out against the planned sanctioning of reproductive rights, organized talk circles, and took her imprisoned friends' children out for icecream. Untypically for the era, she donated the whole sum of the compensation for her husband's murder, which she received from her former comrades, to establishing people's colleges. These colleges functioned as government independent institutions and provided education for talented but poor youth.

Germaine was born into a privileged family, as the daughter of the well-known French Finance Minister Necker. Perhaps it is also her class privilege that makes her unfit for the above listed literary canon. As she was a woman in 18th century France, she received no formal education, instead she was tutored by governesses and by her mother. Júlia, on the other hand, was born into a poor Budapest working-class family, yet, she also received her education from her family. Another uniting feature is that both of them were in their true element when having conversations in salons. The elite salon-life of the Enlightenment was an asylum that offered intellectual thrill to those opposed to the formal hierarchies reigning over state institutions. During the Hungarian communist dictatorship family and friends' circles, parties, and later the flying universities were the spaces in which small resistance groups that fought for a more just country were formed. These small spaces, like an apartment exhibit or theatre, were not only suitable for strengthening one's own commitment, but also for the marking of boundaries between oneself and others, and for the evaluation of others' systems of values. This was that alternative public space that Júlia organized and this is Germaine's and Júlia's common heritage: a value-based political activism that challenges traditional spaces and often uses them for its own purposes. It is

also the intellectual heritage of European political life. Although clearly part of this heritage, atypical women's lives and destinies are still not entering the canon.

We need to reconsider this heritage because there are two imminent dangers facing the rules and praxis of science, or in other words, facing the canon itself.

One of these dangers is that in more and more countries the state is becoming a fugitive of illiberalism. To think that this new mode of governance will not influence scientific life elsewhere, or that its questioning of the contents, institutions, social relevance and therefore state funding of knowledge will stop at the borders, would be an error.

When this is being executed, as is currently the case, then the elite that has been selected through various institutional and less institutional processes, and as the representatives of which we are here today, can choose among different courses of action. One can politely suppress a disdainful smile while reading about how incompetent minions are placed on the heads of well-paying state institutions, just like in the time of Germaine. Or one may hope that the politically motivated withdrawal of financial support that makes real intellectual work impossible in many notable institutions will be temporary, just like Júlia's contemporaries did. One may hope perhaps that the elite enlocked within the ivory towers of science, that is, in the scientific institutions, will be able to keep the populist powers of alternative scientific discourse at bay. I hold that this is self-deception. In a number of countries the very foundation of science, the freedom of expression and truth-seeking are criminalized or delegitimized by the state. The existent European system of scientific institutions has always considered the raising of enlightened and educated citizens as its primary task. This enlightening tradition was and is easy to break. This is the first danger.

The second danger is that our overbureaucratized neoliberal universities with their impact factor obsession and their conveyor belt-style teaching, while being apt at many things, are no longer suitable for raising responsible, critical thinkers. Goethe, himself embedded in his era's institutional system, wrote somewhat condescendingly about his encounter with Germaine: "She was in her element when she could philosophize in a salon, but what is the worth of such speculation? Does it require anything more than some talent to chat in a sparkly and spirited way about inscrutinizable questions? In this, she found a great pleasure

that almost bordered passion." But who can talk about and think about science in a way that "almost borders passion" when scientists suffocated by administrative tasks are annually valued with index markers? According to the memoirs of an eyewitness, Biogné; Germaine raised her own children in this passionate spirit: "...each of them studied whatever they felt like studying."

This would be the kind of education, founded on rigorous intellectual work, on passion and volunteerism that I myself had received in the seminars of the Budapest flying university during communism. This is the tradition represented by the CEU, that I am a committed professor of for twenty-seven years now. This passionate and free approach to science necessarily gets into conflict with that hierarchical control of education which sees citizens as subjects to be kept under surveillance at all times – just as it has happened in the case of the CEU. And this is where I would like to say a heartfelt thank you to each of you individually, and to the organization of ALLEA for supporting the CEU during this tough period.

The freedom of science and passion together open up the possibility of intellectual resistance. Science is not an absolute system, where the rejection of the system would automatically become part of the system itself, and any criticism of the system would be immediately discredited by the fact that it arrived from outside of the system. It did not matter, that her valet, Joseph Uginet, and her maid, Olive Uginet were both covert informers of Fouché, the powerful French Minister of Police. For decades, this married couple were sometimes Germaine's sole confidantes, who organized her literary, financial and love life. It was through them that she sent what she thought were secret messages to publishers and lovers, and they took the sheets of her writings to the press. Similarly, it did not matter that Júlia was aware that her phone was wiretapped, her letters were read, and that her best girlfriend reported on her to the state security. Despite this, or perhaps exactly because of this, they unrelentlessly organized, talked, and wrote.

Both Júlia and Germaine refused to compromise their values in order to make a deal with power. "If there was a public trial there should be a public burial." said Júlia persistently, when they tried to persuade her to have her husband reburied in a close circle of family and friends. In one of her most significant works, *Corinne*, Germaine revealed the decline of the

Napoleonic era's intellectual life. She also rejected Fouché's advice to insert a few words praising the emperor's brilliance and victories, despite Fouché having made vague promises to Germaine that "every obstacle will be removed and all of her wishes will be fulfilled." Neither Júlia, nor Germaine were willing to exercise self-censorship. Baron Vogt, in his letter on her *De l'Allemagne*, warned Germaine that "It would be better if you kept your distance with political topics, if you did not express your hatred against tyranny as you do in all your work... I would like your work to appear entirely innocent, so it would disarm your critics and take away the edge of malevolence." Germaine did not follow this friendly advice, and her work was prohibited. Still, she managed to flee the country together with her shrewdly hid manuscript, which she then had published elsewhere – achieving a huge international success.

As it should be apparent by now, both of these women, Germaine and Júlia were exceptional and brave women, who deployed the possibilities offered by alternative public spaces for value-based politics and for living life with dignity. The question is: why are they missing from historiography? Why were they forgotten?

But are they really forgotten? After all, Germaine, as the daughter of the illustrious Finance Minister Necker, and as the leader of a renowned salon – in other words, as the provider of space for celebrated men where they could exercise their intellect –, is present in history books. Similarly, Júlia is also present on the iconic picture taken at László Rajk's funeral as the grieving wife and mother. However, I am thinking of a different canon.

Both Germaine and Júlia devoted their lives to the fight against a tyrant – Napoleon and Kádár, respectively. They did so by being fugitives of paradoxes. In 1813, when Germaine was forced into exile by Napoleon, she sought support in London. There she sided with the English government – which was fighting against the common enemy, Napoleon – and not with the English liberal opposition, who saw the "leader of the people [in Napoleon], who was destined to ruin the decayed structures of obsolete monarchies." Germaine put her dilemma thus: "To betray your country or to support the tyrant – this is the question;" – she wrote to Benjamin Constant – since "What kind of a French person would rely on Cossack bayonets... But still capable of wishing to see Cossacks parading on the streets of Racine."

Júlia remained committed to leftist communist values throughout her entire life. She fought against the Kádár-regime because it demolished and corrupted leftism. She did all in her might to protect dissident thinkers with her personal authority. Those same thinkers abandoned the leftist tradition in favor of neoliberal transition in 1989.

For Júlia, expressing political truth, naming who is a tyrant and who is not, was of primary importance. She also doubtlessly believed in equality. Likewise, Germaine was committed to her country, to freedom, to patriotism and equality, and condemned Napoleon who misappropriated these values and sent millions to die on the battlefield. She wrote: "I can feel an almost physical joy when opposing an unjust power." We can all derive strength from this individual, physical joy. And we need to derive strength for our value-based fight, just like Germaine and Júlia did, because they knew that it will be a long one. There is but one thing we cannot avoid when it comes to a fight: fighting it. Not fighting would mean the loss of our right to the passionate protection of free science, which is the foundation of all scientific work.

Thank you once more for the prize.

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