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### **The Bug and the Jew. Franz Kafka and János Major in 1960s' Hungarian Art**

One morning, when János Major woke from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in the bathroom into a horrible vermin (ungeheures Ungeziefer). The similarity of his experience to Gregor Samsa's position in Franz Kafka's novel *The Metamorphosis* (*Die Verwandlung*) is far from being a coincidence.

What follows here is the complex interpretation of a single artwork based in a web of references ranging from Kafka and his late revival through *Der Stürmer* iconography and Soviet anti-Zionism to 1960s Hungarian experience of Jewish identity.

*The Yid is Washing Himself* – the work's title – is inscribed on the iron etching itself. The offensive and derogative term used to describe Jews, along with the date and place – 1967, Budapest – are on the bottom left corner of the print. The inscription takes the form of a stamp, loaning an official look – perhaps the sign of administrative or censorial approval? – to the work.

The praying mantis-like, distorted (in)human figure – the main motif – bears the features of the artist himself. The diabolical smile of this vermin-like creature adds to the uncanny nature of this cruel self-caricature.

I will argue that this rather unprecedented Jewish self-representation has a dual ancestry. First, it is indebted to Franz Kafka's novel, and more broadly to the revival and cult of the author in the sixties. Secondly, *Der Stürmer*-type anti-Semitic iconography and Nazi terminology – identification of Jews with vermin – form the other basis of János Major's unmerciful self-portrait.

Kafka's 1960s renaissance in the region had on the one hand been the result of the popularity of French existentialist literature and philosophy. On the other hand, Kafka's figure served as a Central European role model for Jewish identity building. In the context of Socialist

Hungary, where thematization of Jewish identity on a public level was rather restricted, publication of the works of a Jewish writer gained special importance.

The historical context and the theme of Soviet dominance over the Eastern Bloc can also be attested in Major's work. The *double entendre* linguistic references of the inscriptions form an inherent critique of Soviet and Hungarian anti-Semitism of the era. The adjectives used by the artist to describe himself refer both to Stalin's anti-Semitic Doctors' plot (1952–53) and to "anti-Zionism" introduced in the Eastern Bloc under Soviet influence following the Arab-Israeli Six-Day War of 1967.

The vermin-like representation of the artist standing in his bathroom is coupled with pornographic references to the Jewishness of his figure. The subversive character of the print is accentuated with further linguistic references to Soviet dominance, Marxism and also the visually predominant Red Star under which the artist is depicted.

The close and contextual reading of János Major's masterpiece could not only shed light on this Hungarian Jewish artists' practice and worldview, but it could also contribute to Franz Kafka's reception history and widen our knowledge about identity politics and anti-Semitism entangled in Central European history in the shadow of the Soviet empire.

*English publication about the artist:*

Daniel Véri: "*Leading the Dead*" – *The World of János Major*, Budapest, Hungarian University of Fine Arts, 2013.