

**These of the PhD Dissertation**

**POET IN DICTATORSHIP**

**Biography of József Ratkó – his public activities and fights against  
the existing political power**

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## **I. Objectives of the thesis and outline of the topic**

Ratkó József poet, playwright and translator (1936–1989) had lived as a child in state custody from 1949, first in Hajdúhadház then in Tiszadob, later he became a library director in Nagykálló. He was a unique and distinct figure of the post-1945 Hungarian literature with his literary work now processed and evaluated thoroughly in view of its aesthetical features. Ratkó belonged to the Hungarian literary line spanning several centuries and featuring authors from Balassi and Zrínyi through Kölcsey, Petőfi, Zsigmond Kemény, Ady, Móricz, Attila József, Gyula Illyés, László Németh, Péter Veres to László Nagy, Ferenc Sánta and Sándor Csoóri. These authors considered the significance of literature not only from the point of view of aesthetics and readers' amusement, but as a forum providing opportunities to deal with all kinds of individual and collective problems and issues in the society. The writer, according to them, is an intellectual with responsibility for his or her nation, and is entitled to provide suggestions and recommendations to tackle problems of the community mainly in eras when the autocratic political power is indifferent or even hostile towards the real interests of the nation.

Ratkó thinks that art and “poetry is service – to the people you belong to” and not only intellectually, but also in the field of public activities. This is the reason why, apart from his work as an author and library director, he participated selflessly in cultural movements and organizations, represented issues of public interests, which had positive impact on a region, social group or the whole nation. In the 1980s, he became politically active in the National Council of the Patriotic Popular Front, then in the political movement of the Hungarian Democratic Forum. Ratkó was convinced that his activities promote the well-being, the intellectual and spiritual rising of his immediate or wider community and the whole nation. His literary career was not conventional and confined only to working at his desk and in editorial rooms, but also embedded in the political and social events of the Kádár regime.

Ratkó, given his working class background and family relations to the first communist female minister, Ratkó Anna, could have become a heavily promoted writer of the Kádár regime, but he became a critic of the political system instead and a “hostile dissident” according to the categorization of the infamous III/III department of the Interior Ministry. He had had conflicts already with people from the corridors of power when he was a secondary school student in Nyíregyháza because of certain poems he had written.

The books and papers published so far about him have focused on Ratkó’s art in view of the aesthetics considerations, but of course they provide a more or less deep insight into the poet’s life and public activities, his work for his community and social environment leaving a lasting impact in the life of certain groups of the Hungarian society. I was surprised to see during my research work that the poet had led a very active social and public life at the local and national levels, apart from his literary activities, and it was more or less documented. Ratkó said in 1969 that he “didn’t consider biographical details important, because they only motivate and not determine the tasks of a poet”, but I think that his biography should be written in the historical and chronological context, because without that the type of poetry he produced can not be fully understood and appreciated. Thus we would not only be able to get closer to Ratkó’s oeuvre and biography but we could get to know about several social and political events of the Kádár era in Szabolcs-Szatmár County or elsewhere in the country. Since the poet was engaged in a wide range of activities, my dissertation has an interdisciplinary nature with features related to the history of the society, family affairs, press, social movements, education, literature, etc. in Hungary. I touch upon Ratkó’s literary pieces without a detailed analysis, but I focus on that part of his work which analyses the Hungarian history or the Kádár era with its social and political events as well as the ensuing changes in the country.

My aim was to draw up his complete artistic and intellectual development embedded in the Kádár regime.

The exploration of Ratkó’s reactions to public events and affairs can provide a deeper understanding of both the poet’s way of thinking and his age. I tried to follow how a talented young man with a working class background and fulfilling all the sociological requirements of the regime in connection with him had become a prominent dissident belonging to the so-called popular-national opposition. How he could have such an effect on the cultural life of his community, on the views of his readers related to Hungarian history, culture and national

identity apart from being able to work in the literary elite? How he could put forth his views of literature and art as well as the most important questions in his age? How he talked about social and political taboos, the 1956 revolution and what their reception was? How and why he was forced to leave the University of Szeged? How his career took him to Nagykálló, where as a library director he organised and managed the library and public education of the small region which included more than a hundred small rural communities. How he, as someone who had grown up in state custody, tried to help the children of similar fate. How he operated a volunteer group set up with Nyíregyháza College students in 1969 to visit small rural communities in the neighbourhood of Nagykálló and to pursue cultural activities until they were forced to stop. I also explored how the Felsőtárkány readers' camp was organised in 1972 and how the movement of readers' camps became stronger and stronger in the 1980s having several thousand students on the courses. What kind of role did Ratkó play in it and with what methods did they try to use to promote independent thinking of the children and how did they develop their creativity and knowledge of a Hungarian history and literature?

Ratkó, his friends and József Béres achieved after several years that the Béres drops became commercially available in the Herbária specialist shops from 1978 on.

I also presented the story of initiatives to set up an independent journal after 1945 in Szabolcs-Szatmár County and how the first local radio journal called Hangsúly had been created and operated between 1983 and 1987 by Ratkó, István Antall, András László Nagy and, for some time, András Görömbei. I analysed how they had tried to address political taboos in general and draw the public attention to the ethnic Hungarian literature. I also evaluated what the local and national reception of Hangsúly had been like and why it hadn't been allowed to come out as an independent printed journal.

József Ratkó, like a great number of other intellectuals started participating directly in the political life of the 1980s. From 1985 he participated in the activities of the National Council of the Patriotic Popular Front. I tried to follow his activities there on the basis of his speeches and other documents, and how he had perceived the development of the Hungarian Democratic Forum movement in the activities of the popular-national opposition, and how the local political organisation had been set up in 1989 in Nagykálló. In what kind of non-governmental organisations did he play part? Meanwhile, I also tried to find out how the III/III department of the state security had watched his steps and moves and what restrictive measures had been taken against him.

## **II Applied methods**

In 1975, a short and incomplete bibliography of 39 pages was published about Ratkó József's literary activity. No studies were made, however, about his biography and public activities with the historical background of his age so, as a first step, I had to compile the list of his works and a bibliography. I processed the heritage left behind with the family and collected more than three hundred pieces of letters, unpublished early poems, a short story for film adaptation, plays and sound recordings from private persons and archives. In the national Széchenyi Library, the Library of Debrecen University, Zsigmond Móricz County and Town Library of Nyíregyháza and József Ratkó Town Library of Nagykálló, I collected his writings published in books and journals. I also assembled the reviews, memoirs, articles, notes, letters, and minutes published about him. In the case of articles in the newspapers separation is impossible on the basis of genre, so they are groups together in the list of sources and literature. During my research work, I met a great number of his family members, friends, colleagues and followers. I made oral history interviews with twenty one people and had conversations for several hours with many of them. I checked the interviews and written memoirs from several directions, because the interviewees and other sources of information often remembered the past of several decades ago incorrectly or mixed up the order of events. I also had to use text criticism of this kind in connection with some pieces of Ratkó's prose and make corrections and amendments. I did thorough research work in the Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County Archive of the Hungarian National Archive (into documents from Nagykálló, Penészlek, Nyírbátor, Nyíregyháza Council and MSZMP documents and minutes, as well as those from Nyíregyháza Mihály Váci Cultural Centre). I looked at the archives of the József Ratkó Town Library in Nagykálló and Zsigmond Móricz County and Town Library of Nyíregyháza including its Local History Collections (official library documents, letters). I visited Petőfi Literary Museum (letters, sound recordings), Ottó Hermann Museum in Miskolc (letters), the House of Literature collection of Déri Museum in Debrecen (letters, sound recordings), the Historical Archive of the State Security Office (III/III reports), the Office of Documents of the Hungarian Writers (letters, articles in connection with the readers' camps movement), Office of Documents in the Children's Home of Berkesz (the misconduct case in 1978), the Archive of the Hungarian Radio and the Nyíregyháza Studio of the Hungarian Radio (interviews, programmes on tapes, Ratkó-writings). Due to an extensive research work, I reconstructed Ratkó's biography and public activities, and embedded it in the Kádár

era trying to present the reception and effects of the particular cases. I also used the relevant literature in the cases where Ratkó took part in historical events like the formation the popular-national movement or the birth of the Hungarian Democratic Forum that are well-documented by sources and historians. I tried to present the related events with plenty of sources and documents to make the analyses exact. Unfortunately, from the surveyed periods not many background materials were archived. The reports found in the Historical Archives of the State Security Services provided valuable research material for my thesis, although a lot of those documents had been destroyed during the stormy periods of the political changes.

I divided my dissertation into three major chapters – *His biography*, *His literary work (1966–1989)*, *His activities in public life*, and within this structure I followed Ratkó József's life in chronological order.

### **III List of the thesis results**

Since a great number of sources have not been processed up to date, my thesis features these results. The greatest one is, however, that Ratkó's life, public activity, and fights against the political power have not been documented so extensively before and presented in the relevant historical context.

In the chapter of *His biography*, I outlined the social background of József Ratkó, who was born in Budapest in a poor working class family with a left-wing, social democrat, and then communist political orientation. I also documented his troubled childhood and more peaceful life in the children's' home of Hajdúhadház in 1949 and then in Tiszadob in 1951. I gave a detailed presentation of his secondary school years in Nyíregyháza, and the start of his literary activities, his first open conflict with the ruling political power because of his outspoken poems, and his ever widening relationship with prominent writers in Budapest. I wrote about his period in Szeged University, which he had been forced to leave. Then about his career in Nagykálló, where he organised the cultural life of a region with more than a hundred tiny rural communities with great enthusiasm as a library director. I pointed out how important the writers'-readers' meetings had been for the type of authors like Ratkó, where a lot of sensitive issues had been addressed and not only literary and aesthetic ones.

In the chapter of *His literary work (1966–1989)* I dealt with Ratkó's concept of literature and history, the romantic role he assumed in line with the typical Hungarian

intellects focusing on their mission of making up for the desired social development that had not been previously achieved. Ratkó thinks that the artistic expression, apart from the universal problems of human existence, is to deal with the problems of the nation and society, the taboos in the communist system in an open or symbolic way, therefore the poet can make recommendations and provide orientation for the reader. I pointed out the background and genesis of the poem titled *Üzenet (Message)* related to the so-called Penészlek debate. I wrote about the reception of his poem with the title of *Törvénytelen halottaim (My illegal dead ones)* which had focused first in his age on one of the main taboos of the Kádár regime, the 1956 uprising and freedom fight by putting the executed prime minister's name, Imre Nagy in a complex context of secondary meanings.

I pointed out how successful his play about Saint István was in 1985 with the title of *Help the King*. Both its language and thought made the play popular with the audience and the professional circles. Ratkó dealt with problems in the age of Saint István that resembled current issues to make the message more exciting. In connection with *Antigone* by Sophocles translated by Ratkó along with Creon, I mentioned the sensitive questions that came up with the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 56 revolution.

In the chapter of *His activities in public life*, I pointed out how Ratkó had helped the lives of the inmates of the children's town in Tiszadob and Berkesz and how he had drawn the attention of the society to the children's life in state custody and what pedagogical views he had had in connection with the reforms of education in the children's home, and the case of the physical abuse that had taken place in 1978 in the children's home in Berkesz. I presented how he had operated a volunteer group set up with Nyíregyháza College students in 1969 to visit small remote rural communities in the neighbourhood of Nagykálló and do cultural activities until they were forced to stop.

I also explored how the first readers' camp in Felsőtárkány had been organised in 1972 giving way to the movement of readers' camps, which had as many as several thousand students camping on the courses in the 1980s. I gave an evaluation of Ratkó's activity in the movement and his critical comments on their practices.

When discussing the Béres-story, I pointed out the role Ratkó had played along with his artist friends Ferenc Kósa, László Nagy, Sándor Csoóri, Ferenc Sánta, András Balczó and others, in the legalization of the Béres Drops that had helped many patients with cancer. The Béres-story was not a singular one, since a number of other medical inventions tried to find

their way to the sick through the maze of the bureaucracy of the Kádár era. In connection with the radio programme called *Hangsúly*, I told about the attempts to set up a literary journal in Szabolcs-Szatmár County after 1945. Meanwhile, I discussed the current media system ruled and censored by the Public Information Office. *Hangsúly* was a monthly, literary programme broadcast in the Radio of Nyíregyháza between 1983 and 1987. It drew a regional and then a national interest. Its success proved that with appropriate moral and financial support it would have been viable in printed version, too. Apart from presenting the story and reception of the journal, I pointed out that the editors had tried to address politically sensitive issues like the social and cultural situation of the ethnic Hungarians living in the neighbouring countries. With the discussion of topics like this, *Hangsúly* contributed greatly to the preparation of the political change at the local level.

In the 1980s Ratkó József, like a great number of other intellectuals, became interested in politics and the organisations of political life. I gave an analysis of his left wing political views in which a value-based conservatism was deeply rooted. He was a patriot and a democrat who considered the sovereignty of the country important and followed the idea of Péter Veres about “the people and nation”. I also pointed out his ideas about the demographic situation in Hungary. Ratkó considered it one of the greatest problems of Hungary and found it tragic that in the Kádár regime several million abortions have been carried out.

In my thesis, I put an emphasis on Ratkó’s public comments and activities too, including his views at literary meetings and contributions made at the Writers’ Camp in Tokaj. I presented in detail his speech in 1986 in Tokaj because it comprehensively dealt with the current political and cultural situation of the late Kádár era including the controversies of literary life. Finally, I talked about his travels abroad as the deputy of the Hungarian literature.

In 1985, József Ratkó joined the activities of the reformist Patriotic Popular Front lead by Imre Pozsgay. At the 8th congress of the PPF in 1985 December, the poet made an important speech in which he drew the public attention to the deteriorating situation of the ethnic Hungarians living in the neighbouring countries, and at Imre Pozsgay’s request he undertook the work in the National Council of PPF. I also mentioned Ratkó’s relationship with the prominent politician János Berecz from Szabolcs-Szatmár County.

Ratkó participated in the major meetings of the emerging popular-national opposition as early as in the 1970s, presenting themselves in the assemblies of *Lakitelek* – where Ratkó was also there – and in the establishment of the Hungarian Democratic Forum, which had

originally been a grass-roots movement. Ratkó was not involved in the activities HDF at the national level, but made a significant speech at the establishment of its Szabolcs-Szatmár County organisation, and he started and headed the local group in Nagykálló. I highlighted the fact that in 1988-1989 the poet supported the idea of summoning a national assembly, also promoted by politicians like Imre Pozsgay, Mihály Bihari, and others from HDF to draw up a new constitution in order to replace the so-called Stalin constitution from 1949.

The end of the thesis presents the contribution of József Ratkó in the activities a few NGOs at the end of the 1980s and discusses the story of the Partium Literary Society, the legalisation of which had been made impossible by authorities until 1989.

The scientific achievement of the present thesis is the result of a research work of several years, in which József Ratkó's interesting and rich life can be followed in the context of the current social and political developments of his age.



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### List of publications related to the dissertation

#### Hungarian book chapters (3)

1. **Babosi, L.:** A prózaíró Ratkó József: Műhelytanulmány a költő prózakötetének szerkesztése közben.  
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4. **Babosi, L.:** "Szegények katonája voltál": Babosi László beszélgetése Mócsi Ferenc íróval a nyolcvan éve született Ratkó Józsefről és az olvasótábori mozgalomról.  
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9. **Babosi, L.:** Ratkó József életrajza II. rész.  
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10. **Babosi, L.:** Ratkó József életrajza III. rész.  
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12. **Babosi, L.:** "Vigyázzatok, ha közelíttek hozzá...": Ratkó József életrajza I. rész (1936-1966).  
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16. **Babosi, L.:** Keleti panteon.  
*Kvt. kis h.* 13 (1), 19, 2008. ISSN: 1416-2040.
17. **Babosi, L.:** "Európai látóköri magyar": Emlékezések Németh Lászlóra.  
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23. **Babosi, L.:** Társasági tükör: A nyíregyházi Móricz Zsigmond Kulturális Egyesület első évkönyvéről.  
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24. **Babosi, L.:** Villámsújtotta kor.  
*Irod. Jelen. 6* (59), 23, 2006. ISSN: 1584-6288.
25. **Babosi, L.:** Az élő Krúdy: Katona Béla legújabb posztumusz kötete.  
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26. **Babosi, L.:** "Nekem Fábíán Zoltán a barátom volt": Ratkó József és Fábíán Zoltán kapcsolata - levelezésük tükrében.  
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30. **Babosi, L.:** "Szolgálni fényvel és erővel": Kerekasztal-beszélgetés Ratkó Józsefről - Antal Attila, Antal Balázs, Babosi László, Béres József, Gerliczki András, Karádi Zsolt.  
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31. **Babosi, L.:** "Magasles és bunkerek között": Nagy Gáspár levelei Ratkó Józsefhez.  
*Hitel. 22* (5), 31-39, 2009. ISSN: 0238-9908.

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