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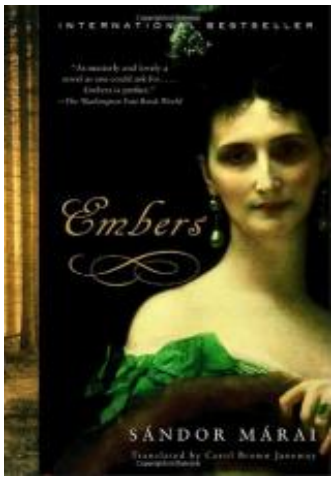
Embers

Sandor Marai, translated by Carol Brown Janeway



About the Book

Henrik, a retired general of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, has lived for years as a recluse in his castle in the Hungarian forest waiting for the arrival of Konrad, the best friend of his youth, whom he has not seen for forty-one years. The two men met when they were roommates in military school during the heyday of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Their friendship was influenced from the beginning by the vastly different circumstances of their births: Henrik was born into nobility, whereas Konrad was impoverished and living out his parents' dream for him to lead an aristocratic life. Despite these different backgrounds, their unusually close friendship persisted into adulthood. The young soldiers shared an apartment in Vienna and experienced that city at the height of its splendor. Then, after Henrik's marriage to Konrad's friend Krisztina, the threesome remained close, regularly dining together, but at their last dinner, grave events severed Henrik and Konrad's relationship, culminating in Konrad's sudden abandonment of Vienna. When the novel begins, forty-one years have passed, and Henrik has finally received word of Konrad's return.

On the evening of their reunion, the aged soldiers will engage in the most painful battle of their lives?a war of words waged to reach the truth of their past. In the course of their conversation, Henrik recounts the calamitous aftermath of Konrad's departure, and the painful betrayal that Henrik and Krisztina faced because of Konrad's actions. Now, Henrik has had a lifetime to gain the wisdom and perspective of age and to ponder not only the meaning of friendship, but also the purpose of life itself. And as the tragic mystery of their relationship subtly unravels, so too unfolds a portrait of a man shaped by a defunct empire and cleaving to the last vestiges of his obsolete nobility.

Discussion Guide

1. What makes the bonds of a "friendship that reaches back to childhood" so strong that "death itself cannot undo" it [pp. 141?2]? If friendship is, in fact, "a duty," as Henrik asserts [p. 110], what is the nature of the "duty" between Henrik and Konrad? Did one or the other fail in this obligation, and if so, how? Was Konrad "faithless" [p. 112]?

2. What was the "debt" that one of them feels toward the other after Henrik meets Konrad's parents and learns the truth about Konrad's background [p. 47]? How does this realization change the nature of their friendship? Was this event the turning point in their friendship?

3. Henrik says, "One would need to know why all this happened. And where the boundary lies between two people. The boundary of betrayal. . . . And also, where in all this my guilt lies" [p. 169]. Of what is Henrik guilty? If Henrik's twice-made assertion that the guilt is "in the intention" [pp. 112, 139?140] is true, which was Konrad's greatest offense: his intention to kill Henrik, his affair with Krisztina, or his abandonment of their friendship? Or, as Henrik speculates, was both men's betrayal of Krisztina the greatest offense of all [p. 192]?

4. On more than one occasion, the men allude to the demise of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Referring to their past as soldiers, Konrad says, "What we swore to uphold no longer exists" [p. 93], and Henrik later speculates further that "Perhaps this entire way of life which we have known since birth, this house, this dinner, even the words we have used this evening to discuss the questions of our lives, perhaps they all belong to the past" [p. 182]. In what ways is the novel an elegy to the past, to a lost way of life? Can the course of Henrik and Konrad's friendship be read as a metaphor for the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire?

5. Márai writes, "And because of their friendship, each forgave the other's original sin: wealth on the one hand and poverty on the other" [p. 61]. How do the different circumstances of their births contribute to Henrik and Konrad's separation? Which is the greater sin in this friendship?wealth or poverty? What kind of society allows for this comparison of wealth and poverty to original sin? Is this a comparison that would hold true in all societies?

6. Konrad's differences, according to Henrik and his father, made him unsuited to the career of a soldier [pp. 52?4]. The implication is that Henrik, by contrast, was eminently suited to the career of a soldier. But is the portrait of the hardened general consistent with the young Henrik who nearly died in Paris because he "needed love" [p. 29], and who wanted to be poet [p. 30]? And if it was actually Henrik's personality that was not suited to the military, could it have been Henrik who envied Konrad his differences, rather than Konrad who envied Henrik his birthright?

7. Henrik says: "There are worse things that suffering and death . . . it is worse to lose one's self-respect. . . . Self-respect is what gives a person his or her intrinsic value" [p. 190]. Does Henrik retain his self-respect by adhering to the noble "male virtues: silence, solitude, the inviolability of one's word, and women" [p. 69]? What is lost in the preservation of self-respect? Does Henrik have any regrets about the way he has chosen to live his life?

8. What motivated Konrad to introduce Henrik to his parents and their poverty? Was it the same motivation that made Krisztina want to keep a diary?the fear that "life will fill with something that can no longer be shared, a genuine secret, indescribable, unutterable" [p. 160]? Is it this common trait that drives Konrad and Krisztina together?

9. What is the nature of the revenge Krisztina achieves by dying? Is this different from the revenge that Henrik seeks from his meeting with Konrad, and if so, how [p. 182]?

10. What is the truth that Henrik seeks from Konrad [p. 93]? Does Henrik gain the insight for which he's looking, or did he somehow already have it? Is Konrad's refusal to answer Henrik's question on p. 204 tantamount to a confession, or does it reveal something else? By throwing Krisztina's diary into the fire, is Henrik acknowledging that he already knows the truth or indicating that it is not in the diary at all [p. 205]?

11. In the society of Konrad and Henrik's youth, "[F]ifty million people found their security in the feeling that their Emperor was in bed every night before midnight and up again before five, sitting by candlelight at his desk in an American rush-bottomed chair, while everyone else who had pledged their loyalty to him was obeying the customs and the laws. Naturally true obedience required a deeper commitment than that prescribed by laws. Obedience had to be rooted in the heart: that was what really counted. People had to be certain that everything was in its place" [p. 56]. How did this society foster Henrik's personality? Without the influence of such an environment, how might he have behaved after Konrad's departure?

12. How do the Europeans differ from the natives in Konrad's account of his life in the tropics [pp. 80?83] Do these stereotypes date the novel? How do they play to modern political sensibilities?

13. What qualities do the Arabs display that Henrik admires [p. 123]? Do Arabs embrace the truth about man's natural instincts to kill while Westerners simply disguise it [pp. 124?9]? Does Henrik's character embody an element of Western hypocrisy?

14. Music plays a significant role in the novel, especially in the power it holds over Henrik's mother, Konrad, and Krisztina [p. 178]. Why its influence inherently dangerous [p. 51]? Is there a similarity between the symbolism and meaning of the hunt for Henrik and his father and the power of music over the others [p. 122]?

15. How does Henrik's parents' marriage influence his own marriage? What might the King have "said to the young wife who had come from a foreign country and wept as she danced" [p. 24]?

16. What happens to Henrik's mother when she moves from the city to the castle deep in the forest [pp. 20?22]? How is Henrik affected as he moves from his castle in the forest to the city [p. 27]? How do these changes in landscape alter their behavior and highlight their different temperaments? Does Konrad have a similar experience when he moves to the tropics [pp. 80?83]?

17. As Nini and Henrik gaze at the dining room, "All of a sudden the objects seemed to take on meaning, as if to prove that everything in the world acquires significance only in relation to human activity and human destiny" [p. 71]. How does the appearance of the room recall Henrik's and Krisztina's view of Konrad's room forty-one years earlier [p. 166]? What can objects reveal about customs and traditions? About emotions and relationships? What does Henrik's replacement of Krisztina's picture in the castle's portrait gallery signify?

18. One might read **Embers** as a study of the powers and the limitations of words: the spoken word, as seen in the conversation between Konrad and Henrik, and the written word, as represented by the diary of Krisztina. At one point, Henrik muses: "Sometimes it seems to me that it is precisely the words one utters, or stifles, or writes, that are the issue, if not the only issue" [p. 117]. And later he says:

What can one ask people with words? And what is the value of an answer given in words instead of in the coin of one's entire life? . . . Not much. . . . There are very few people whose words correspond exactly to the reality of their lives. It may be the rarest thing there is. . . . Nevertheless, one can get closer to reality and the facts by using words, questions

and answers" [pp. 163?4].

Do words have inherent power as Henrik proposes? What are the limits of language? How does the power of the written word compare to the power of the spoken word? Significantly, it is not with words that the book ends, but with the kiss between Henrik and Nini, which is "an answer, a clumsy but tender answer to a question that eludes the power of language" [p. 213]. Does this kiss provide the answer to Henrik's second question?

19. A third-person narrator tells the history of Henrik's family and his youthful friendship with Konrad, but then the events during and after their last dinner together with Krisztina are recounted from only Henrik's perspective. How is the reader's view of the story affected by hearing only his voice for this part of the story and not Konrad's? How might Konrad have told the story, and how might his point of view have changed the whole tone and focus of the novel?

Author Bio

Sándor Márai was born in Kassa, in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1900. He rose to fame as one of the leading literary novelists in Hungary in the 1930's. Profoundly antifascist, he survived World War II, but persecution by the Communists drove him from the country in 1948, first to Italy and then to the United States. Márai committed suicide in San Diego in 1989. He is the author of a significant body of work, which Knopf is translating into English.

Critical Praise

"A lustrous novel. . . . [with] its powerful undercurrent of suspense and its elegantly wrought armature of moral and metaphysical argument. . . . Triumphant."

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