

**ABSTRACT OF PHD THESIS**

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Mihály Babits and the San Remo award

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## **Choice of subject and the objective of the thesis**

On the 30th of March 1940 Mihály Babits received the ‘Foreign Author’ category San Remo award for the year 1938 for his Hungarian translation of *the Divine Comedy* in a pompous setting, in the city of San Remo. Even though this prize – that included 50 000 Liras – was among the very few acknowledgments that Hungarian literature received from abroad, no comprehensive study has been carried out in the subject. This is partly due to the San Remo award’s very short existence and partly to the fact that already at the time confusing and often contradictory information was published about the event in the Hungarian media. Literary historians have not paid much attention to this biographical fact either. The published Babits monographs do mention the award, but none of them discusses in merit what kind of award the San Remo award actually was.

In this dissertation I provide a historic overview of the San Remo awards as well as a list of the ‘Foreign Author’ category winners along with the Italian and Hungarian press reception that followed the victory of Babits. This is

how – from the perspective of the awarders and the awardees – this paper explores the real value of this prize, and it attempts to clarify umpteen, so far obscure issues. No reassuring answer has been provided so far as to the nature of this award, whether it was a private, national, regional, state-specific or international award and besides the other categories, what role the ‘Foreign Author’ category played. It is also unknown how contestants could apply for the award and how Babits could win the prize for 1938 in 1940 with a translation that had been completed for over a decade, not to mention that fact that he never applied for it!

Babits’ San Remo award is a historic novelty that provides an authentic insight into the Italo-Hungarian cultural relations at the time, and a behind the scenes look into the art policy and awarding system of the Mussolini era.

### Sources and Methodology

The dissertation publishes the findings of a study completed in San Remo, Imperia, Genoa, Rome and

Budapest, and it also attempts to provide a summary of the studies previously published in the topic. It is the continuation of a Master's thesis I successfully defended at the Faculty of Humanities in the Pázmány Péter Catholic University in the summer of 2005. The research work commenced the same year. I first travelled to San Remo, then to Genoa. My work was impeded and almost no relevant materials could be found on site since local people are eager to erase the last remaining memories of Fascism. The sole Italian researcher of the subject, art historian Daniela Lauria from Imperia provided me with vast amounts of data regarding the awards' overall history, which proved to be an immense help. Afterwards I focussed on the history and the other awardees of the 'Foreign Author' category. In 2006 and 2012 I travelled to Rome where I explored the relevant documents in the Central Archives and in the archives of the Accademia dei Lincei in Rome. Unfortunately the outbreak of World War II practically wiped the award away, and this is reflected in the scarcity of available documents. In summer 2013 I got access to the archives of Imperia that provided further useful details. The study of Babits'

reception in Italy between the two world wars based on Hungarian and international literary pieces, newspaper articles, studies published there and the author's Italian correspondence constituted another important path in my research. The final chapter of the dissertation is dedicated to the Hungarian press coverage that the prize awarded to Babits generated.

### **Accomplishments of the PhD thesis**

In the early 1930s, the fascist Mussolini government set a condition for the renewal of the San Remo City Casino's gambling licence; namely, the owners were to spend a certain percentage of the profits on promoting tourism and cultural life in the region. The agreement stipulated the formation of the Permanent Committee for the San Remo Literature and Art Prizes (Comitato Permanente Per I Premi San Remo), entrusted with the supervision of the organised fine art, music and literature events. Several members of the Committee were government officials. The ministerial decree on the gambling licence renewal came into force on 4 January

1928 and it was valid for 15 years. The agreement signed in 1933 between the public limited company operating the Casino and the city of San Remo specified that a certain part of the 13 million Lira concession fee paid by the casino operator had to be used for the cultural development of the region and for the organisation of programs that would attract tourists from Italy and abroad alike (such as sailing and car racing contests, concerts, etc.). Section 13 of the agreement made provisions for the establishment of the San Remo Literature and Art prizes in the following categories: literature, painting, sculpting, music and foreign author. Applicants in the latter category – in which Babits won – originally should have submitted their application in the topic of the Italian Riviera. The unhidden agenda behind the creation of these prizes was to raise awareness in the Italian and international press and to attract visitors through the exhibitions, galas and other accompanying events. The agreement also stipulated that the award-giving ceremonies should take place every other year, alternating with the year of the Venice Biennale since many of the organisers contributed to both events.

Altogether three award-giving ceremonies were held: in January 1937, on 2 March 1938, and on 31 March 1940. The professional background for the prizes was provided by the Mussolini-founded Royal Academy of Italy that delegated the members of the different juries. These juries, however, were entrusted only with the task of putting forward recommendations, the final decisions were made by the Permanent Committee of the San Remo Literature and Art Prizes that could overrule the juries' recommendations, generating immense tension and press debates between the Academy members that could last for a whole year. This power play was particularly visible in the Foreign Author category, where foreign policy interests dominated the artistic ones. During the prize's short life several Hungarian authors submitted their application (or someone else did on their behalf). The archives contain information about Cécile Tormay's travel journal *The City of Flowers, the Home of Sirens*, János Mester's *Education in Italy in the 19th century*, and Terka Lux's historical novel *Naples and Buda*, but it is plausible that other Hungarian authors also participated in the contest. It wasn't Mihály Babits to apply for the San

Remo call for competition, therefore the news of winning the award caught him by surprise. His victory was thanks to Antonio Widmar who recommended the Hungarian poet and writer in a private correspondence to Arturo Marpicati, a former colleague of his from Rijeka. At the time Widmar was a jury member of the Foreign Author category. Babits won the prize in 1938 for translating *the Divine Comedy* into Hungary. The award-giving ceremony in 1940 became a mighty celebration of fascist culture. The 35 winners received their prizes from the Duke of Bergamo, following which the Minister of Popular Culture Alessandro Pavolini delivered a speech. In his talk he referred to Babits as “one of the vibrant stars shining on the sky of European literature”. Italy was obviously making an effort to reconcile Romania and Hungary, since the 1939 winner of the category, the Romanian Italianist Alexandru Marcu received his prize for the same accomplishment – the translation of *the Divine Comedy* into his native Romanian – also in 1940. Babits’ award received large media coverage, he was criticised also by the right and the left for accepting the fascist acknowledgment.

## Publications

1. Babits Mihály *San Remo-díja*, Új Dunatáj, 2006.  
szeptember, 54-60.
2. Recepciórtörténeti párhuzamok: József Attila befogadásának első időszaka és Babits San Remo-díja, In= Véges végtelen: Isten-élmény és Isten hiány a XX. századi magyar költészetben (szerk. FINTA Gábor, SIPOS Lajos), Budapest, Akadémiai, 2006.
3. Babits Mihály recepciója Olaszországban és a San Remo-díj, Bp. Argumentum, 2014 (before publishing)