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**Rekai donation of Ferenc Molnar and Lili Darvas Papers**

Gift of Julie Rekai Rickerd and Judyth Rekai, 2013

Includes correspondence and other print material related to Hungarian-American playwright and novelist Ferenc Molnar (1878-1952) and his legal wife, the actress Lili Darvas (1902-1974), with some letters addressed to Kati Rekai (1921-2010). Rekai's aunt, Wanda Bartha, was Molnar's private secretary, literary advisor and soul mate who died prematurely at the age of 38, and was also best friends with Darvas. Most material is in Hungarian. Molnar wrote *Companion in Exile* (1950) to honour the memory of his life with Wanda Bartha. Also includes a variety of material related to Kati Rekai, including a typescript account by Dr. John Rekai of the Rekai family's experience emigrating to Canada in 1950, print items and some correspondence.

Dates: correspondence, 1947-1957

Extent: 1 box (12.5 centimetres)

**Biographical information:**

**Ferenc Molnar**

Ferenc Molnar was an Hungarian-American playwright, director, novelist, short-story writer, and journalist. Molnár wrote in all about 42 plays. Much of his life Molnár spent away from his native country; he died in New York. Molnár's novel, *The Paul Street Boys* (1907), is among the most popular books in Hungary.

Ferenc Molnár was born Ferenc Neumann in Budapest into a well-to-do Jewish family. His father, Mor Neumann, was a famous physician. At the age of eighteen, Molnár began a career in journalism and then studied law in Budapest and Geneva. He joined the editorial staff of the Budapest newspaper *Budapesti napló* and changed his German name, to be known as a Hungarian writer, which he was. In 1906 he married the journalist and painter Margit Vészi; they divorced in 1910. She was the daughter of József Vészi, the editor-in-chief of *Pester Lloyd*. Like Molnár, she came from a Jewish family.

At the age of twenty-two, after writing a number of short stories, Molnár published his first novel, *Az éhes város* (The Hungry City). Molnár's early plays were comedies, such as *A doktor úr* (1902) and *Józsi* (pub. 1904). In 1907 he gained fame as a novelist with *A Pál utcai fiúk* (The Paul Street Boys), a story about two rival boy's gangs on the streets of Budapest.

*Az ördög* (1907, The Devil), taking its central idea from Faust and dealing with marital infidelity, was staged in New York a year after its Hungarian premiere. This comedy established Molnár's fame as one of the leading dramatists of his day. Molnár wrote the play for Irén Varsányi, who was at that time Hungary's leading actress. Her jealous husband, Illés Szécsi, a wealthy manufacturer, challenged him to a duel, but it was eventually Molnár who spent two weeks in jail.

*Liliom*, perhaps Molnár's most enduring achievement, failed first but it soon soon gained international success. The première in December 1909 in Budapest left critics a bit bewildered. The hero is killed in the fifth scene but he is back on earth in the seventh. After four screen adaptations the play becomes eventually familiar as the Rogers and Hammerstein musical *Carousel* (1944). Earlier also the Italian

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composer Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924) had thought of setting it to music, although he and others, including George Gershwin, opted to not. Influenced by Oscar Wilde, Pirandello, and George Bernard Shaw, but with his own touch of wit and grace, Molnár fused in *Liliom* naturalistic scenes with mystical symbolism.

During World War I Molnár served for a year as a war correspondent. His reports were published in book form in 1916 under the title *Egy haditudósító naplója* (The Diary of a War Correspondent). Some of these writings also appeared in the *New York Times*, although Hungary belonged to the enemies of the Allies.

Between 1908 and 1940, sixteen of Molnár's plays were produced on Broadway. When he visited the United States with his wife in the 1920s, he was honored with a dinner reception at the Waldorf Astoria in New York, at which guests included Gershwins and Vanderbilts, Eugene O'Neil, and others. Until 1925, he resided in Hungary, and then moved to Germany. In Vienna he stayed in a comfortable hotel for long periods, in Budapest he was seen often at the Café Central on Károlyi Mihály street.

Molnár's most interesting plays from this decade include *Játék a kastélyban* (1926, The Play's the Thing), which followed a Pirandellian theme of reality and illusion through a discussion of how a play should be written. *A hattyú* (1921, The Swan), a comedy about a girl being groomed to marry a prince, was filmed in 1956 with Grace Kelly. In *Olympia* (1928) Molnár assailed the cruelty of aristocracy toward the common man. *The Good Fairy* (1930), had a respectable run on Broadway. Its film version from 1935, directed by William Wyler, and starring Margaret Sullivan and Herbert Marshall, was written by Preston Sturges, who invented a new beginning and damped down observations on marital infidelity. The film was a smash hit. It was remade in 1947 as *I'll be Yours*.

After the *Anschluss*, Molnár fled to the United States (according to some sources 1936) to escape Nazi persecution, settling into New York City in January 1940. In his new home country, he was celebrated for his masterly theatrical technique and the sparkling dialogue of his characters, which at the same time expressed a sense of humanity and decency. Underpaid workers and vagrants Molnár portrayed with great sympathy.

Molnár held court in his suite at the New York Plaza Hotel, and continued writing, but he did not speak much English and he became increasingly isolated. In Hungary his plays were banned by the blacklisting of Jews during the Communist period. Molnár died on April 2, in 1952. Because of a superstitious fear that in preparing a will he would shorten his life, Molnár died intestate. His second wife was the actress-singer Sári Fedák (1879-1955), who became a Nazi. They divorced in 1925 and Molnár then married the actress Lili Darvas (1902-1974); she began a successful television career in the 1950s. After the war, Sári Fedák was sentenced to prison for a short period by the "People's Court". In the Communist Hungary Molnár's works were viewed with suspicion long after his death. Even in the 1980s Attila Tamás wrote in *A History of Hungarian Literature* (1983): "He had great talents as a dramatist, but he lacked the appreciation of the noble human values necessary for true greatness."

P.G. Wodehouse adapted *Game of Hearts* from a text by Molnár, and also *The Play's the Thing*. Tom Stoppard his play *Rough Crossing* from Molnár's *Játék a Kastélyban* (*The Play's the Thing*) in 1985, and *The Guardsman* was made into a radio drama in 1947 by [Arthur Miller](#). In addition, a number of Molnár's plays and novels were turned into Hollywood films, among them *No Greater Glory* (1934),

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*Liliom*, filmed several times, and *The Swan*, first directed by Dimitri Buchowetzki in 1925, remade in 1930, and then again in 1956 by Charles Vidor, starring Grace Kelly and Alec Guinness.

Billy Wilder's satirical *One, Two, Three*, about Coca-Cola, a raging capitalist, and Communism was based on Molnár's play *Egy, kettő, három* (1929). Wilder shot the film mostly in Germany.

Excerpted from: <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/molnar.htm>

### Lili Darvas

by Thomas F. Connolly

International actress Lili Darvas won acclaim in her adopted country, the United States, on stage, in films, and on television. Born in Budapest on April 10, 1902, to Alexander and Berta (Freiberger) Darvas, both of whom were Jewish, she was educated at the Budapest Lyceum. She made her professional debut at age twenty, playing Juliet in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* at the Magyar Színház in Budapest. Married to one of Hungary's outstanding playwrights, Ferenc Molnar, Darvas appeared in a range of modern and classical works and became one of Budapest's leading actors. Molnar, inspired by her talent, created a series of sparkling plays for her, including *Riviera*, *Olympia*, and *The Girl from Trieste*. In 1926, Darvas joined the acting troupe of the German impresario Max Reinhardt, even though she had learned to speak German only two years earlier, by reciting classical German verse plays for hours at a time.

She performed with Reinhardt's company in Vienna and Berlin and at the Salzburg Festival until 1938. Her roles included Beatrice in *Much Ado about Nothing*, Lady Milford in *Kabale und Liebe*, Vivie in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, and Sadie Thompson in *Rain*. When Reinhardt's company traveled to New York in 1927, Darvas appeared as Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as Faith in *Jedermann*, Lucille in *Danton's Tod*, and Beatrice in *The Servant of Two Masters*. Toward the end of her prewar European career, she played the title role in the film *Marie Baskirchew* (1936). Her next significant movie role would be in the MGM all-star musical *Meet Me in Las Vegas* in 1956.

In 1938, she left Europe, immigrating to the United States, where she became a citizen in 1944.

In 1944, she made her Broadway debut as Peter Gray, the women's page editor of the *Herald Tribune*, in the play *Soldier's Wife*. The following season, she played Gertrude in Maurice Evans's famous "G. I." production of *Hamlet*. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Darvas worked steadily on the New York stage. She returned to Budapest to perform in a revival of *Olympia* in 1965 and made the film *Love* there five years later. Her last major Broadway stage role was that of Madame Neilsen in *Les Blancs* in 1970.

In 1951, she began a television career that would lead to roles in over a hundred programs. Her most significant television performance was in the title role of the National Educational Television Opera Theatre production of *Rachel La Cabana* in 1973.

Excerpted from: <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/darvas-lili>

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Box 1 37 folders	Correspondence from Ferenc Molnar and Lili Darvas to Helen and Marta Clippings and print about Ferenc Molnar, Darvas and Wanda Bartha Kati Rekai material Most material is in Hungarian
Folder 1	Molnar to Helen and Marta, on The Plaza Hotel letterhead, New York city ALS January 13, 1951
Folder 2	Molnar to Helen and Marta ALS October 27
Folder 3	Molnar to Helen and Marta ALS November 10
Folder 4	German clipping re: 'Franz' Molnar April 14, 1950
Folder 5	Molnar to Helen and Marta Long ALS September 25, 1947
Folder 6	Lili Darvas to Helen ALS October 15, 1957
Folder 7	Molnar to Helen ALS August 4, 1950
Folder 8	Molnar to Helen ALS April 27, 1949
Folder 9	Lili to Helen ALS January 18, 1951
Folder 10	Molnar to Helen and Marta ALS January 13, 1950

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Folder 11	Molnar to Helen and Marta ALS January 5, 1951
Folder 12	Molnar to Helen ALS August 25, 1949
Folder 13	Molnar to Dr. Rékaiék ALS July 20, 1951
Folder 14	Lili to Elekné and Szönyiné TLS From New York
Folder 15	Molnar to Dr. and Mrs. John Rekai TNS December 20, 1951
Folder 16	Copy of TLS Franz J. Horch to Mrs. Szönyi Andorné January 1950
Folder 17	Copy of TLS condolence letter to Ferenc Molnar from Billy Rose, Ziegfeld Theater, on the death of Wanda Bartha August 29, 1947
Folder 18	Clippings in Hungarian re: Ferenc Molnar
Folder 19	Copy of clipping in Hungarian Re: Ferenc Molnar and Wanda Bartha (Vanda Barta)
Folder 20	<i>Színház</i> cinema magazine, Hungarian October 7-13, 1947
Folder 21	Press release re: Ferenc Molnar gift to New York Public Library November 10, 1947
Folder 22	Copy of article in Hungarian re: Ferenc Molnar
Folder 23	Copy of Ferenc Molnar, 'An Appreciation'

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Folder 24	<i>Fanfares</i> Volume 10, Number 3, October 1976 Re: Molnar's play, 'The Guardsmen' Stratford Festival
Folder 25	Articles re: Ferenc Molnar 'Molnar's Budapest' and 'The Adaptable Ferenc Molnar' Shaw Festival program, 2011
Folder 26	'Vaudietól – Katikory' [?] original holograph manuscript by Széhely Molnar Hand delivered to Kati Rekai
Folder 27	New York Public Library TLS from Azladits Lola to Kati Rekai February 8, 1985, Hungarian
Folder 28	Bulletin of NYPL with announcements of Ferenc Molnar gift, April 1951
Folder 29	Typescript account by Dr. John Rekai of the Rekai family journey on the S.S. Columbia emigrating to Canada, 1950, in Hungarian
Folder 30	Kati Rekai Public Lending Right Commission earnings, 2009-2010
Folder 31	Dennis, from Singapore, to Kati Rekai TLS March 28, 1989
Folder 32	Copy of Rekai family photograph [Budapest?]
Folder 33	<i>The Spark</i> Central Hospital newsletters
Folder 34	TLS to Kati Rekai from National Library Hungary February 2000
Folder 35	Identification and name tags, Kati Rekai
Folder 36	Email re: Honorary Life Membership in The Writers' Union of Canada for Kati Rekai November 14, 2007

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Folder 37	print
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