

# March 23, 24 and 25, 2026 VALENCIA INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP

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# THE DOOR

*Magda Szabo*

The Door · 1987

Trauma · Guilt · Emotional power · Death



# MAGDA SZABÓ — WHO IS SHE

**1917** Born in Debrecen, Hungary  
**1940** Bachelor's degree in Latin-Hungarian, Debrecen  
**1947** House with Tibor Szobotka, writer  
**1949** Baumgarten Prize → withdrawn the same day  
**1949–58: 9 years** without publishing. Teaches in primary schools.  
**1958** Returns to literature with the novel *Fresco*  
**1960** Moves to Júlia Street, Pasarét, Budapest  
**1978** Kossuth Prize. Julianna Szőke dies  
**1987** Published *The Door* (La puerta)  
**2003** Prix Fémina for best foreign novel  
**2007** Died in Kerepes reading a book, 90 years old

## *Censorship as a foundational wound*

The Hungarian Stalinist regime withdrew the Baumgarten Prize from her on the very day it was awarded. She was dismissed from the Ministry and silenced for nine years. During that time, she wrote in a drawer and taught in primary schools.

The novel *The Gate* was born from that double silence: the political one and the one of moral debt to Szőke Julianna, the real woman who inspired Emerenc. Szabó described her as "the other mother who took over from the dead one."

*The work was translated into more than 40 languages*

# THE REAL RELATIONSHIP

## MAGDA SZABO

Writer, Protestant intellectual, Debrecenian bourgeois. Lives at 3 Julia Street, Pasarét (Budapest). From her balcony, she has a direct view of the maid's door. Recognized by the State but marked by censorship. Emotionally dependent. Chronic guilt. Need for approval.

Her husband, the writer Tibor Szobotka, also wrote to Julianna —with more harshness and less mythology than Magda.



*20 years*

1960

1978

## BLONDE JULIANNA

(Szeredás Emerenc in the novel)

She lives at 7 Júlia Street—two houses down. A cook, then the building's caretaker. Illiterate. Of rural Hungarian origin. She arrived at the building in 1939. She kept between 9 and 14 cats. She cooked for the entire building. Famous for her relentless work ethic and her secrecy.

According to neighbors who knew her, the character of the literary figure faithfully reflects the real woman.

# WHAT IS NOT TOLD: THE TOMB

In her will, Magda Szabó stipulated that Szőke Julianna's urn be moved to the Szabó-Szobotka family tomb in Farkasréti Cemetery, Budapest. This was done. However, because it is a protected monument, the Hungarian authorities did not allow Julianna's name to be added to the tombstone.

Szőke Julianna—the real Emerenc—rests anonymously in the tomb of the two writers who immortalized her. The tomb bearing her name, where Szabó originally buried her, remains empty.

*"From the hands of my dead mother, Emerenc's fingers, deformed by work, took over the control of my best self."*

*"From my dead mother's hands, the fingers deformed by Emerenc's work took command of the best part of myself."*

# HUNGARY BEHIND THE CURTAIN — 1960s–70s

## Eastern Bloc

Hungary in the Soviet orbit after the failed revolution of 1956. The State controls culture, medicine and private space.

## "Goulash Communism"

Kádár allows for some cultural openness, but surveillance and censorship persist. Privacy remains suspect.

## Intellectuals in precarious

**situations**  
Szabó himself was silenced for nine years. Success depends on the regime's tolerance: state awards are also chains.

## The closed house as a form of

**rebellion**  
In this context, Emerenc's door is not just about privacy: it's about resistance. A house that the State cannot search.

## The final eruption

When doctors, health authorities and neighbors enter Emerenc's home, the episode evokes the gesture of state control over private life.

*"Én öltem meg Emerenc Szeredást."*

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*"I killed Emerenc Seredas."*

First sentence of *The Door* (La puerta), 1987

Codependent consciousness narrates the moral responsibility of the work. The entire novel is an attempt to explain that phrase. The confession positions Magda as the accused and the reader as the judge from the very first line.

# EMERGENCY PSYCHOLOGY

## FOUNDATIONAL TRAUMA

During her childhood, her twin brothers were killed by lightning while she was looking after them in a field. Upon learning of this, her mother threw herself into a well.

Emerenc survived paralyzed, unable to act. That episode is the foundation of:

→ Compulsion to save others → Terror of helplessness → Hatred of one's own weakness → Obsessive control of space → Accumulation of cats as emotional substitutes → Radical distrust of men

Her work ethic is a form of self-defense: if she's the best at her job, no one has an excuse to invade her privacy.

## LITERARY CLINICAL FEATURES

- Hypervigilance and widespread mistrust
- Cognitive rigidity — thinks in absolutes, makes judgments, does not engage in dialogue
- Avoidance of privacy — the door as a containment mechanism
- Ritualistic behaviors: does not lie down, does not accept weakness
- Animal accumulation — 9 to 14 cats (confirmed in the royal household)
- Affective economy: only love those who can save you
- Aphorisms as a barrier — turning experience into law to shut down dialogue

# MAGDA'S PSYCHOLOGY

## **Chronic guilt**

His identity is organized around moral debt. The initial confession, "I killed Emerenc," is how he processes any conflict in which he participated.

## **Emotional dependency**

She needs Emerenc's approval to stay afloat. Without it, Szabó writes, "my life was falling apart." It's not friendship: it's a one-sided emotional support structure.

## **Relational strategy: offer ruin**

Learn that saying "I'm hungry" activates Emerenc's life-saving function. The vulnerability shown is not innocent: it's the code that opens the link.

## **Intellectual vanity**

Szabó herself admitted it: she believed her education gave her the right to decide what was best for Emerenc. She intervened, convinced she was saving her, and destroyed the only thing that sustained her.

# THE DYNAMICS: CODEPENDENCY AND ASYMMETRY

## MAGDA (the one who needs approval)

It reveals vulnerability (it shows ruin)

He accepts humiliation, he sets no limits

He idealizes Emerenc, turning her into a moral figure.

It cannot function without your approval.

He transgresses the door for love (and destroys it)

## EMERENC (the one that needs to be indispensable)

She responds with rescue (she positions herself as savior)

↔ It demands absolute loyalty and exclusivity

↔ He despises intellectual work, and judges based on physical labor.

↔ It cannot function without someone to save

↔ The door was the only limit that held her up.

# THE DOOR — A COMPLETE SYMBOL

## THRESHOLD

Border between the public and the private. Between the social life of Budapest and the traumatic memory of Emerenc.

## IDENTITY

The door protects a way of being in the world. Opening it is to subject that identity to judgment.

## POLITICAL RESISTANCE

In communist Hungary, the locked house is a gesture of sovereignty. The final break-in evokes state control over private life.

## SHAME

Behind the door: dirt, sick cats, accumulated objects. That which cannot be seen without ceasing to be who it is.

## TRIBUNAL MORAL

Whoever opens the door passes judgment. Magda opens it out of love, and it condemns her. The well-intentioned act becomes a crime.

## DEATH

Opening it doesn't save Emerenc's body. It destroys it. She doesn't die from the stroke; she dies from being seen in her vulnerability.

# STROKE AND DESECRATION — CLIMAX

1

## Signs

The clock strikes the hour and she doesn't appear; Magda's world crumbles. Emerenc hasn't arrived. Unswept snow lies in front of the doorway. A scent seeps through the cracks.

2

## Negative

Emerenc has been lying paralyzed on the floor for days. She refuses to let anyone in. She doesn't want to be seen weak. She doesn't want them to see the state of her house.

3

## The lie

Magda shouts that there's a fire. Emerenc gathers his last bit of strength and turns the key. The door gives way.

4

## The irruption

Doctors, health authorities, neighbors. Terrified cats. The world that Emerenc never wanted her to see, sees her.

5

## Moral death

Emerenc acknowledges the betrayal. His body survives the stroke, but not the humiliation. He dies in the hospital, his back to Magda.

# ANIMALS — PSYCHOLOGY AND SYMBOL

## CATS

Szóke Julianna's royal household typically kept between 9 and 14 cats. Neighbors frequently found cat hair in the food she cooked for the building.

In the psychology of the novel, cats are:

→ Emotional substitutes: replacing impossible human bonds  
→ Symptom of Noah or isolation: locked up like her → Living memory: what Emerenc cannot let go of → Witnesses to the trauma: the only ones who know the inside of the house

When the door gives way, the sanitation workers kill or expel the cats. For Emerenc, it's the murder of his history.

## VIOLA — THE DOG

Emerenc rescues Viola from the snow and gives him to Magda and her husband. The dog lives with the writer but obeys Emerenc with an authority that Magda will never have over him.

Viola functions as:

→ Social bridge: connects with the street and the community → Moral judge: recognizes in Emerenc an authority prior to any law → Witness to death: is the first to perceive that Emerenc is no longer there

Her reaction to Emerenc's death—the only cry that no one had heard—condenses all the pain that the human characters cannot express.

# THE SECRETS

## Secrets of Emerenc

The night of trauma: dead siblings, suicidal mother — she paralyzed. The true state of her house (the filth, the cats). Her love for Magda — "I consider you my daughter, but I won't say so." The objects she kept during the war (persecuted families). Her hatred of men — she was tricked and robbed by a barber.

## Magda's Secrets

Her emotional dependence on Emerenc—more than on her husband. Her previous guilt: silences in the face of colleagues humiliated by the regime. Her relational strategy: she uses vulnerability to maintain the bond. The bourgeois relief when she sees her fallen (horror at the toppled statue). She receives an award while Emerenc is dying in the hospital.

## What none of them say

- Emerenc never says, "I'm afraid."
- Magda never says, "I need you more than I should."
- Neither names what they are to each other: distorted mother/daughter
- None of them mention that the relationship is also about power and submission.

## What only the door reveals

- Emerenc's shame
- Magda's Guilty Curiosity
- The asymmetry of the link
- The death they both fear
- Love is not enough if it does not respect the mystery of the other.

# HAPPINESS, AUTONOMY, AND BETRAYAL FOR LOVE

## *What does it mean to truly help someone?*

*The novel doesn't provide an answer. It presents the conflict without resolving it.*

### **EMERGENCY**

Happiness is absolute control over one's own life. Dignity outweighs physical health. She would rather die in her filth than be seen in her vulnerability.

For her, surgery isn't salvation: it's the end. Her secret world was the only thing that made her feel like herself.

### **MAGDA**

Happiness is protection, medicine, order. She intervenes, convinced that saving lives is the greatest good.

She survives with literary success and public acclaim. Her conscience is forever marked by a certainty that never leaves her: You can destroy someone by acting out of love.

*"...whose name the author wanted to inscribe on the tombstone, but the authorities did not authorize it."*

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## **The novel is not about friendship.**

*It's about the boundary between saving and destroying, between love that respects and love that colonizes.*

The door that Magda opens in Emerenc's house ends up opening another one that is much harder to close:  
that of his own fault.

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*«I killed Emerenc Szeredás.» · Magda Szabó, *The Door*, 1987*