

**THE LIFE AND TIMES
RED^{OF} MUD
RESERVOIR NoVII**


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GYULA NÉMETH

'THE LIFE AND TIMES OF RED MUD RESERVOIR No VII' IS A COLLABORATION BETWEEN AN ANTHROPOLOGIST (IAN M. COOK) AND A GRAPHIC ARTIST/ILLUSTRATOR (GYULA NÉMETH) ABOUT A BAUXITE TAILINGS STORAGE FACILITY IN THE SETTLEMENT OF ALMÁSFÜZITŐ, HUNGARY.

IT IS ONE OUTPUT FROM THE PROJECT 'BLACK WATERS' RUN BY THE CENTER FOR MEDIA, DATA AND SOCIETY AT THE CENTRAL EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY IN PARTNERSHIP WITH ATLATSZO AND THE BALKAN INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING NETWORK. IT WAS SUPPORTED BY THE OPEN SOCIETY INITIATIVE FOR EUROPE. THE RESEARCH TEAM FURTHER INCLUDED ALEXANDRA CZEGLÉDI (RESEARCH ASSISTANT), GABRIELLA HORN (INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST) AND MÁRTA VETIER (RESEARCHER).

THE NON-PUBLIC FIGURES WHO APPEAR IN THE FOLLOWING PAGES ARE COMPOSITE CHARACTERS BASED ON INTERVIEWS IN THE SETTLEMENT. THEY ARE NOT INTENDED TO REPRESENT REAL PEOPLE. THE STORY IS NARRATED BY THE RESERVOIR ITSELF AND COVERS THE HISTORICAL, POLITICAL, THEORETICAL, CULTURAL AND SOCIAL ASPECTS OF RED MUD RESERVOIR No VII AND THOSE WHO LIVE IN ITS VICINITY.



HI THERE, I'M RED MUD RESERVOIR NoVII.
I LIVE IN ALMÁSFÜZITŐ, HUNGARY.

YOU MIGHT BE ASKING YOURSELF,
'WHY IS A RED MUD RESERVOIR TALKING'?
AFTER ALL, AREN'T I JUST BAUXITE TAILINGS -
THE RESIDUE LEFT OVER FROM THE PRODUCTION
OF ALUMINA?

WELL, I'M SPECIAL.

LOOK AT THIS PICTURE.
YOU CAN SEE PEOPLE AND PAPER.
BUT, IF YOU KNOW WHAT TO LOOK FOR,
YOU CAN ALSO SEE QUESTIONS:
WHY IS THE SOLIDIFIED RESIDUE ONLY
SEPARATED FROM THE RIVER BY A MUD WALL?
WHAT IS THE SUBSTANCE THAT COVERS ME?
AND WHY AM I NOT COMPLETELY COVERED?

TO ANSWER, WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND
A BIT ABOUT HOW HISTORICAL, SOCIAL,
CULTURAL, POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND CHEMICAL
PROCESSES INTERACT IN THE CREATION
OF LAYERS OF POLLUTION AND CORRUPTION.



MY HISTORY IS, NATURALLY, BOUND UP WITH THE SETTLEMENT
OF ALMÁSFÜZITŐ WHERE I RESIDE.
WE WERE PRETTY MUCH BOMBED INTO THE GROUND BY THE USA
IN WW2, BUT WE WERE REBUILT AS A MODEL ALUMINA FACTORY
SETTLEMENT IN 1950.



SLOVAKIA

YOU CAN SEE ME, MARKED THERE AS RED MUD
RESERVOIR NoVII. CHECK OUT MY SISTER AND
BROTHER RESERVOIRS, NOW ALL COVERED UP.

THE DANUBE

VI

V

IV

III

I-II

UPPER

ALMÁSFÜZITŐ

AND LOOK, VERY CLOSE TO ME,
THERE'S LOWER ALMÁSFÜZITŐ!
AND IF I SQUINT, A LONG LONG WAY AWAY,
THERE'S UPPER ALMÁSFÜZITŐ.

AMAZING TO THINK WE ARE ONE SETTLEMENT.



LOWER
ALMÁSFÜZITŐ

VII

WE ALSO HAVE A FASCINATING SOCIAL HISTORY.
AMONGST THE FIRST SOCIALIST
SETTLEMENTS IN HUNGARY,
UPPER ALMÁSFÜZITŐ WAS BUILT
BY TRUE ARTISTS OF THEIR TIME.

WE'VE BEEN ASSEMBLED
FROM ALL OVER HUNGARY.
YOU CAN FIND EVERYONE HERE,
FROM PROFESSORS TO PROSTITUTES.
BUT WE'RE A SELECT BUNCH,
- NO RIFF RAFF.

TRAINED AND QUALIFIED,
WE WORK HARD
PRODUCING ALUMNI TO BE
EXPORTED TO THE USSR.

THE FACTORY
PROVIDES EVERYTHING.
- MODERN FLAT
FREE HEATING,
FREE WATER.

AND IF ANYTHING BREAKS,
THEY'LL SEND SOMEONE
TO FIX IT. THEY'LL EVEN COME
CHANGE YOUR LIGHTBULB!

THOSE WHO WORK FOR
THE OIL COMPANY
IN LOWER ALMÁSFÜZITŐ
ARE NOT LOOKED AFTER
AS WELL AS WE ARE.

IT MAKES SENSE,
AFTER ALL, WE'RE
THE CREAM
OF SOCIETY,
IF YOU KNOW
WHAT I MEAN.

NÁLKAMUNKABESZÜ-
LETÉSDICSŐSÉTOOLCA

"OUR WORK IS GROUNDED
IN HONOUR AND GLORY"

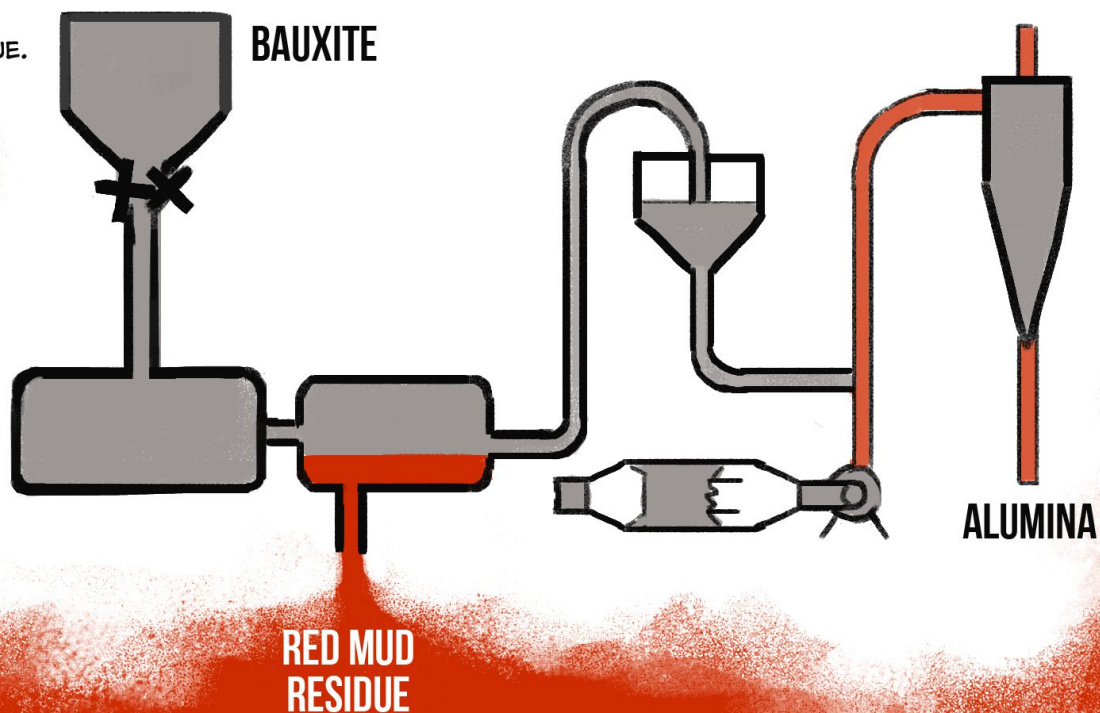
IT'S SO GREEN
AND WE'RE RIGHT
BY THE DANUBE.

I TELL YOU,
THE SPORTS FACILITIES
ARE OUT OF THIS WORLD.
FOR YEARS, I WAS IN THE
VOLLEYBALL TEAM.
WE WERE SECOND IN THE
NATIONAL LEAGUE!

THE 1980'S

BUT MY HISTORY WOULD MAKE LITTLE SENSE WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING IT ALONGSIDE
THE CHEMICAL PROCESSES INVOLVED IN ALUMINA PRODUCTION.

LONG STORY SHORT,
THERE'S A LOT OF RESIDUE.



I'M NOT GOING TO LIE,
THE 90'S WERE TOUGH.

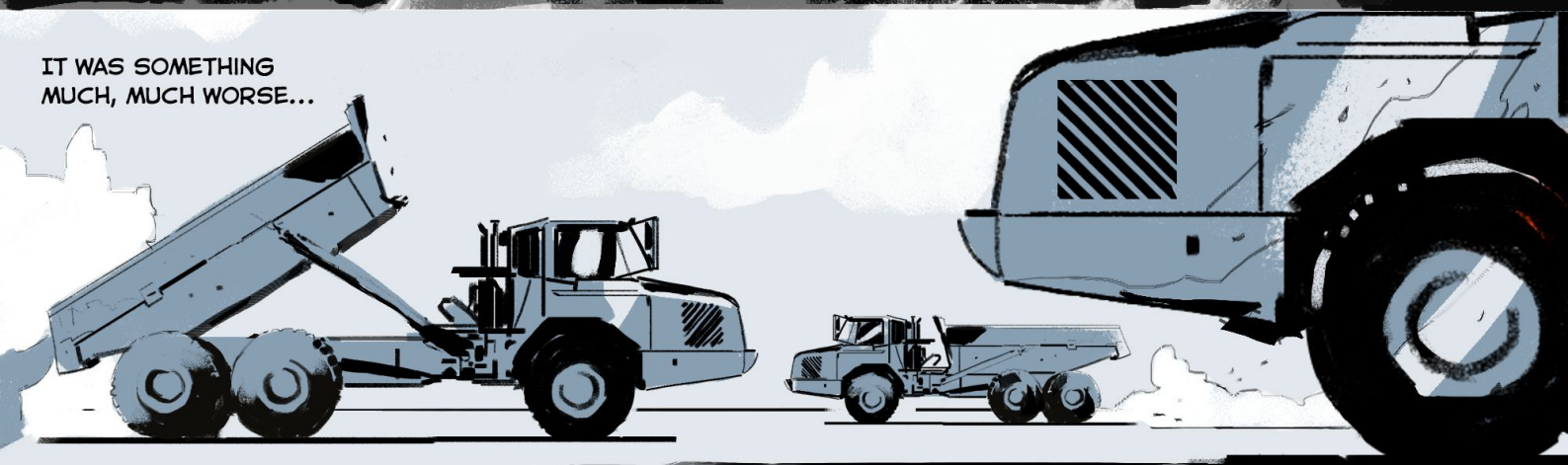


THE FACTORY SHUT.

I REMAINED.

BUT IT WAS NO LONGER
RED MUD THAT THE HUMANS
DEPOSITED IN ME.

IT WAS SOMETHING
MUCH, MUCH WORSE...

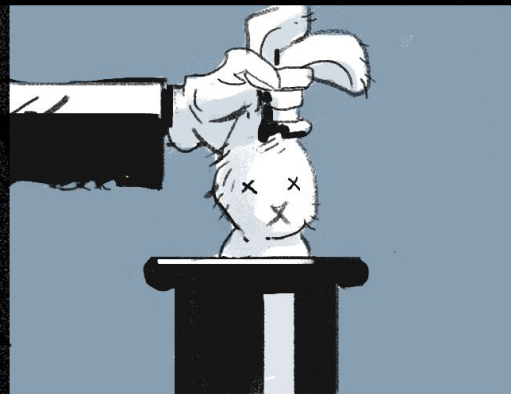
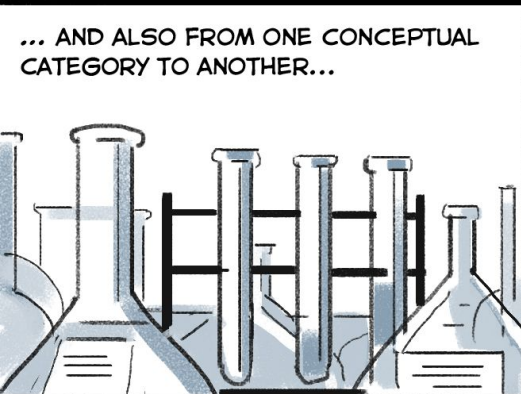


BUT BEFORE I TELL YOU WHAT'S INSIDE ME NOW, PLEASE ALLOW A COUPLE OF PAGES OF SOCIAL THEORY. I HAVE BECOME EITHER A HAZARDOUS WASTE 'DISPOSAL' OR 'RECOVERY' SITE, DEPENDING WHO YOU ASK. BUT THIS DISAGREEMENT OVER WASTE IS NOT UNIQUE TO MY STORY. WHEREVER YOU GO IN THE WORLD, CULTURES DEBATE WHAT IS AND ISN'T WASTE AND WHAT WE SHOULD DO WITH IT. WASTE IS A COMPLEX MATERIAL AND SOCIAL THING.

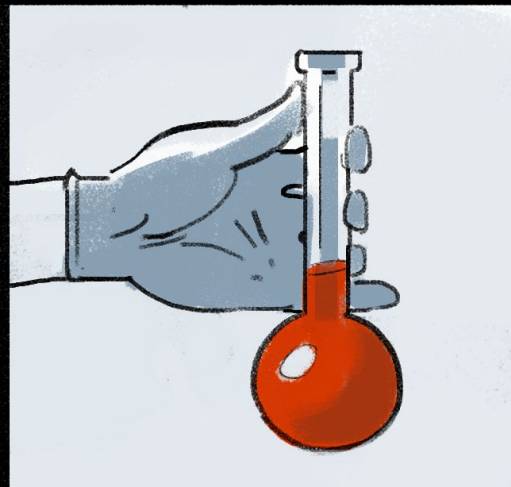
CREATING WASTE INVOLVES MOVING MATERIAL FROM ONE PLACE TO ANOTHER...



... AND ALSO FROM ONE CONCEPTUAL CATEGORY TO ANOTHER...



...AS DIFFERENT REGIMES, GROWTH IN UNDERSTANDINGS AND BREAKDOWN OF SUBSTANCES FALL IN AND OUT OF TIME WITH ONE ANOTHER.



WASTE IS NOT ONLY SOMETHING
SOCIETY DISCARDS, NOR DOES
A TYPE OF WASTE EASILY
REPRESENT SOCIETY.
SOCIETY AND WASTE MUTUALLY
CONSTITUTE EACH OTHER.



THERE IS NOTHING FINAL ABOUT WASTE:
IT HAS AN AFTERLIFE AWASH WITH
INDETERMINACIES.

ONE MAN'S TRASH
IS ANOTHER MAN'S
TREASURE



AND WHAT COUNTS AS WASTE
- AND WHAT KIND OF WASTE -
IS A FIERCE STRUGGLE.



SO WHAT ABOUT MY WASTE SPECIFICALLY? THE TATA ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION COMPANY (ACRONYMISED AS TKV IN HUNGARIAN) NOW MANAGES THE RED MUD. THEY'VE HAD A LICENCE SINCE 2010 TO RECULTIVATE ME BY ADDING A LAYER OF TOPSOIL.

THE TOPSOIL IS A MIXTURE OF HAZARDOUS AND NON-HAZARDOUS WASTE. THERE IS NO 'TREATMENT' OF THIS WASTE, JUST A MIXING OF MATERIALS. DILUTION IS NOT A SOLUTION!



BUT YOU DON'T NEED NON-BIODEGRADABLE HAZARDOUS WASTE SUCH AS HEAVY METALS TO PRODUCE THE TOPSOIL. THERE ARE MUCH SAFER WAYS TO COVER THE RESERVOIR.



THE PERMIT IS FLAWED, ONLY THE RATIO CHANGES, WHILST THE SAME DANGEROUS SUBSTANCES REMAIN. MEANWHILE THE RED MUD SITE REMAINS A DANGER AS IT MAY LEACH INTO THE DANUBE.



THIS IS NOT TRUE! WE CREATE AN ARTIFICIAL COVER LAYER THAT IS SUITABLE FOR AGRICULTURAL USE. WE ARE SOLVING THE RED MUD PROBLEM AND A WIDER WASTE PROBLEM AT THE SAME TIME.



THE PROCESSED WASTES BECOME NATURAL COMPONENTS AGAIN VIA TREATMENT AND CONTROLLED BIOLOGICAL AND CHEMICAL PROCESSES. THE LEVELS OF SUBSTANCES FALL WITHIN THOSE ALLOWED BY THE PERMIT.



LOOK. IF YOU TAKE EGGS, FLOUR, SUGAR AND WATER AND MIX THEM TOGETHER, THEY MAKE SPONGE CAKE. THE SUBSTANCES HAVE CHANGED. IT'S JUST LIKE WHAT WE'RE DOING WITH THE TOPSOIL!



IT DIDN'T HAVE TO BE THIS WAY.
BUT WE CAN'T IGNORE THE POLITICAL
ECONOMIC WEBS I'M TRAPPED IN.



BACK IN 2010 THERE WAS AN ALTERNATIVE
SUGGESTION TO EXCAVATE THE RED MUD
AND CREATE A PROPERLY INSULATED WASTE
RECOVERY SITE AWAY FROM THE RIVER.



BUT IT DIDN'T HAPPEN.
TKV KEPT ON GOING,



MUCH TO THE CHAGRIN OF NOT ONLY
ENVIRONMENTALISTS, BUT ALSO OTHER
WASTE DISPOSAL COMPANIES
WHO USE MORE WIDELY ACCEPTED
AND MUCH MORE EXPENSIVE
TREATMENT METHODS.



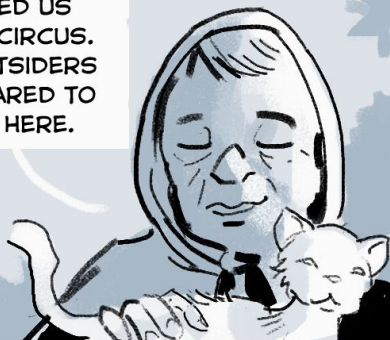
MAYBE THERE'S JUST
TOO MUCH PROFIT IN
SPONGE CAKE TO STOP?



NOW, I WOULDN'T WANT TO GIVE YOU THE WRONG IMPRESSION ABOUT ALMÁSFÜZITŐ AND ITS LOCAL CULTURE. IT IS NOT DEFINED BY ITS RED MUD, NOR HAZARDOUS WASTE CAKE. IT'S A WONDERFUL PLACE FULL OF WONDERFUL PEOPLE.

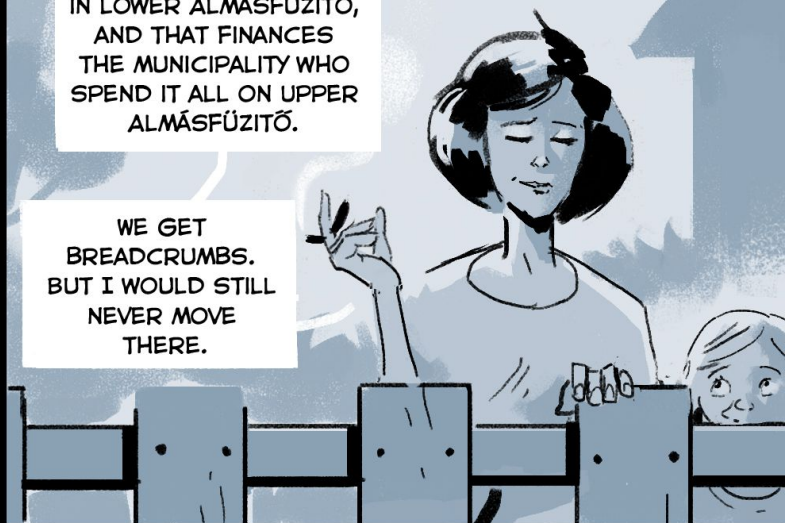
THE SILENCE AND PEACE ARE PRICELESS. YOU CAN FIND RABBITS, DEER AND SQUIRRELS.

GREENPEACE TURNED US INTO A CIRCUS. NOW OUTSIDERS ARE SCARED TO MOVE HERE.



WE HAVE ALL THE INDUSTRY HERE IN LOWER ALMÁSFÜZITŐ, AND THAT FINANCES THE MUNICIPALITY WHO SPEND IT ALL ON UPPER ALMÁSFÜZITŐ.

WE GET BREADCRUMBS. BUT I WOULD STILL NEVER MOVE THERE.



I'M SATISFIED WITH EVERYTHING ABOUT LIFE HERE.

AND THANK GOD WE DO NOT HAVE ROMA PEOPLE. LET THE LOWER PART ACCOMMODATE THEM.



THEY RENOVATED THE NURSERY AND PRIMARY SCHOOL FOR HUNDREDS OF MILLIONS FORINTS.

NOW YOU HAVE PARENTS BRINGING THEIR KIDS HERE FROM ALL OVER.



OF COURSE THAT'S NOT TO SAY I'M COMPLETELY FORGOTTEN. I OCCUPY THE THOUGHTS OF THE MAYOR AND A CAMPAIGNING LOCAL FROM TIME TO TIME.

IT WAS HERE BEFORE I BECAME MAYOR. THE STATE SAYS IT'S SAFE AND THEY HAVE A PERMIT. HOW CAN I OVERRULE THEM?

I'VE SEEN THE BIG TOMATOES THEY'VE GROWN ON THE TOPSOIL. THOUGH I WAS NOT BRAVE ENOUGH TO EAT THEM!



TKV SPONSORS OUR CULTURAL EVENTS. EVERY YEAR I GO THERE WITH SOME FLOWERS AND CHOCOLATES AND THEY TELL ME HOW MUCH MONEY THEY CAN GIVE US. THEY ARE QUITE RICH!



I NEED TO FIND RESOURCES. THE TAX REVENUE FROM INDUSTRY ALLOWS ME TO IMPROVE THE SETTLEMENT EVERY YEAR. MAYORS FROM ELSEWHERE CAN ONLY DREAM OF SUCH INCOME.



THEY 'SOLVED' THE RED MUD PROBLEM BY MAKING A HAZARDOUS WASTE CEMETERY.

I'VE SEEN WITH MY OWN EYES THE LORRIES FROM CHEMICAL, OIL, PHARMACEUTICAL AND PAINT INDUSTRIES.



I LIVE RIGHT BY THE RED MUD. IF TKV CARES ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT, THEN WHY ISN'T THE RESERVOIR COMPLETELY COVERED YET? INSTEAD OF FINISHING THE JOB, THEY'VE STARTED PUTTING A SECOND LAYER ON THE ALREADY COVERED PART.

I SUPPORTED GREENPEACE. AND I'M ALSO FIGHTING. I WANT TO DO IT ALL FOR FÜZITŐ!



AND SO WHERE DO I STAND TODAY?

TKV HAS RECENTLY BEEN SOLD TO A COMPANY OWNED BY LŐRINC MÉSZÁROS - HUNGARY'S LUCKIEST OLIGARCH AND (COINCIDENTALLY) A CHILDHOOD FRIEND OF PM VIKTOR ORBÁN.



NEW LICENCES ISSUED IN 2019 AND 2020 LOWERED THE PERMITTED LEVELS, BUT ALLOWED HAZARDOUS WASTE DEPOSITING/RECUITIVATION TO CONTINUE.

MAYBE THE LOWERING OF THE PERMITTED LIMITS WAS A RESPONSE TO ENVIRONMENTALISTS' PRESSURE.

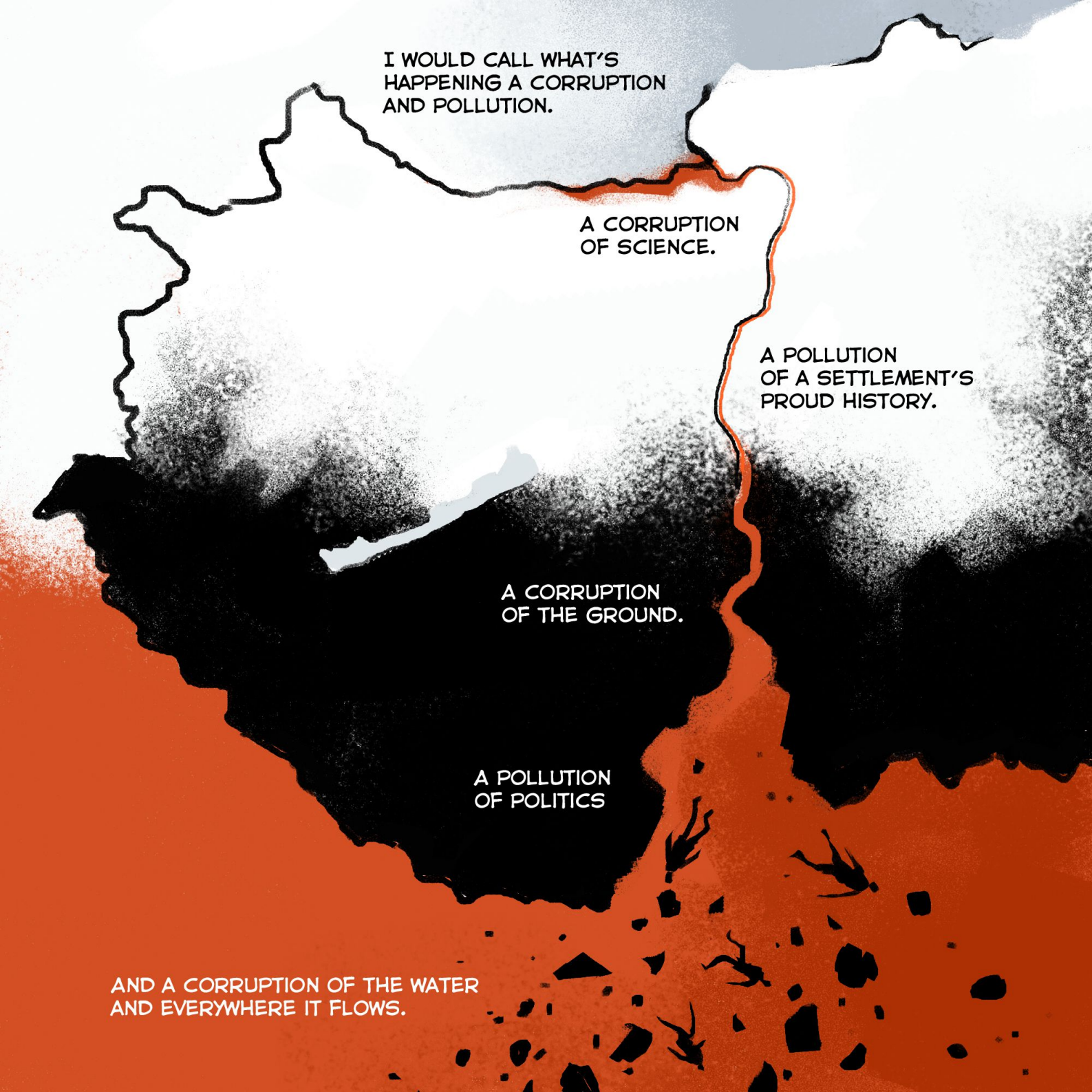
MAYBE IT WAS AN ATTEMPT TO MAKE A LONG-RUNNING EU INFRINGEMENT CASE AGAINST HUNGARY, OVER HOW I'VE BEEN MANAGED TO GO AWAY.

MAYBE IT WAS TO PAVE THE WAY FOR THE STATE TO TAKE OVER WASTE MANAGEMENT COMPANIES.

WHATEVER THE REASON, THE ISSUE OF NON-COMPOSTABLE HAZARDOUS MATERIAL PERSISTS. AND, WITH MÉSZÁROS TAKING OVER, SOME DOUBT THE STATE AUTHORITIES WILL BE INCLINED TO DO PROPER CHECKS OR MONITORING. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION WAS ALREADY WEAK.

MEANWHILE, THE PREVIOUSLY DEPOSITED HAZARDOUS WASTE IN MY TOP SOIL REMAINS. AND MY RED MUD MAY CONTINUE TO LEACH THROUGH THE PERMEABLE MUD WALL THAT SEPARATES ME FROM THE DANUBE.

IT IS NOT ONLY BAUXITE TAILINGS THAT CAN LEACH, HOWEVER, BUT ALSO SOCIETY'S INTEGRITY AS IT WORKS THROUGH ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH WASTE.



I WOULD CALL WHAT'S
HAPPENING A CORRUPTION
AND POLLUTION.

A CORRUPTION
OF SCIENCE.

A POLLUTION
OF A SETTLEMENT'S
PROUD HISTORY.

A CORRUPTION
OF THE GROUND.

A POLLUTION
OF POLITICS

AND A CORRUPTION OF THE WATER
AND EVERYWHERE IT FLOWS.

NOTES, REFERENCES & FURTHER READING

PAGE 2:

PHOTO AVAILABLE: '49TH BOMB WING: ALMASFUZITO OIL REFINERY, HUNGARY #81 AUGUST 9, 1944'
[HTTPS://CATALOG.ARCHIVES.GOV/ID/2906703](https://catalog.archives.gov/id/2906703).

PAGE 3:

'EXPORTED TO THE USSR' - IN AN AGREEMENT SIGNED IN THE 1960'S HUNGARY SUPPLIED THE USSR WITH ALUMINA IN EXCHANGE FOR SLABS OF PROCESSED ALUMINIUM IN RETURN. FOR MORE AROUND THIS TOPIC SEE MICHAEL MARRESE AND SANDOR RICHTER (EDS.) 'THE CHALLENGE OF SIMULTANEOUS ECONOMIC RELATIONS WITH EAST AND WEST' (MACMILLAN PRESS LTD., LONDON, 1990)

PAGE 4:

'CLEANLINESS OF OUR SETTLEMENT' IN TIMFÖLD (II./4. AUGUST, 1976) BY KARÁNSEBESSY LUKÁCS

PAGE 7 & 8:

THESE PAGES DRAW HEAVILY FROM ZSUZSA GILLE'S 'FROM THE CULT OF WASTE TO THE TRASH HEAP OF HISTORY: THE POLITICS OF WASTE IN SOCIALIST AND POSTSOCIALIST HUNGARY' (INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2007)

PAGE 7:

'THICKENING THE LAYERS ON...' IN ALMÁSFÜZITŐI HÍREK (XV./3. APRIL, 2018)

PAGE 9:

FOR FULL DETAILS SEE GABRIELLA HORN'S ARTICLE 'HAZARDOUS WASTE DEPOSIT AT THE RED SLUDGE RESERVOIRS IN ALMÁSFÜZITŐ WAS ISSUED A NEW PERMIT' (ATLATZSO, MARCH 4, 2020)

FOR MORE ABOUT THE PROJECT:

[CMDs.CEU.EDU/BLACK-WATERS](https://cmds.ceu.edu/black-waters)

[ENVIRONMENTALINJUSTICES.ORG](https://environmentalinjustices.org)

[BALKANINSIGHT.COM/2020/05/20/ENVIRONMENTAL-INJUSTICES-IN-CENTRAL-AND-EASTERN-EUROPE/](https://balkaninsight.com/2020/05/20/environmental-injustices-in-central-and-eastern-europe/)