



**PREMIS: Wednesday 23 September 2026,
16.15-17:45 in Källan (C201)**

***Transnational Trauma and Escapism: Reconstructing
Identity and Gender Roles in First World War Captivity
Narratives***
Eszter Edit Balogh

Welcome to the first PREMIS seminar of the autumn semester!

Although cultural and literary histories of the First World War often marginalise captivity, the life writings of prisoners of war and civilian internees reveal a profound crisis of agency, bodily integrity, and masculine identity. Drawing on autobiographical accounts by E. E. Cummings, Aladár Kuncz, Paul Cohen-Portheim, Rodion Markovits, Avigdor Hameiri, and others, this seminar approaches captivity from a transnational perspective, examining how detainees negotiated dehumanisation through practices of everyday escapism and self-reconstruction. Captivity reduced individuals to what Agamben conceptualises as bare life, yet prisoners recovered social agency by transforming impersonal, panoptic spaces into domestic sanctuaries. Meticulously arranged dinner parties, codes of masculine conduct, and home-making practices recreated familiar social structures, enabling detainees to sustain normality despite their radically altered circumstances. Crucially, while such rituals restored aspects of pre-war identity, they also revealed the instability of the roles captives sought to reproduce. This tension culminated in camp theatre and female impersonation, where drag emerged as both a mechanism of containment and a powerful form of disruption. As feminine roles extended beyond the stage into everyday camp life, the distinction between performance and identity became increasingly unstable. These narratives thus portray captivity not only as a site of trauma, but as a liminal space where established forms of masculinity became fluid and negotiable. Ultimately, these life writings testify to a central paradox: the same conditions that reduced individuals to vulnerable, disposable bodies generated the very practices through which they reclaimed agency and imaginatively remade the self.

The PREMIS-seminars are open to all – welcome!

Eszter Edit Balogh is a junior lecturer in English Literature at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), Berzsenyi Dániel Teacher Training Centre in Szombathely, Hungary, where she teaches courses on Anglophone literature from the Victorian to the Postmodern period. She is completing her PhD in English Literature under the supervision of Dr Tamás Bényei. Her doctoral research examines the reconstruction of masculinity and identity in First World War captivity narratives by prisoners of war and civilian internees. Drawing on literary, gender, trauma, and cultural studies, her research adopts a transnational comparative perspective, analysing works by Hungarian, Austrian, British, German, and American writers. Her broader research interests include masculinity, gender and queer theory, life writing, and trauma studies. In 2026, she developed and organised the international interdisciplinary Blended Intensive Programme *Mapping Identities: Gender, Space, and the Politics of Time in Literary and Cultural Narratives*, bringing together students and scholars across four European universities.