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# Hungarian Quarterly

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- In Memoriam Miklós Radnóti
- Twenty Years On: The Pan-European Picnic
- István Deák on Three Brave Officers
- Alan Walker on Hans von Bülow
- Miklós Vajda on George Szirtes
- János Bethlenfalvy on Alexander Csoma de Kőrös
- János M. Bak on a "Jewish Class" in 1939-47... and Since
- The Art of Marta Pan
- Photographs by Lenke Szilágyi



# The Hungarian Quarterly

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*On the cover and on p. 3: Miklós Radnóti, 1941.*

*Photographs by Judit Beck. Courtesy of Museum Literature Petőfi*



Győző Ferencz

# The Poetry of Miklós Radnóti

The Process of Linguistic Self-Construction



*"And that's how you'll end too," I whispered to myself*  
Miklós Radnóti: "Razglednica" (4)<sup>1</sup>

---

*Győző Ferencz,*

*a poet and critic, teaches English and American poetry at the Department of English Studies of Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. He is the author of Radnóti Miklós élete és költészete. Kritikai életrajz [The Life and Poetry of Miklós Radnóti. A Critical Biography]. Budapest: Osiris, 2005, 2009.*



There can be little doubt that it is his last poems that elevate Miklós Radnóti (1909–1944) to the high rank he occupies in Hungarian literature. His poetry in its final dénouement created a matchless unity of life and literature. His last poems, “Fragment” and the verses that survived in the *Bor Notebook*<sup>2</sup>, speak to us from the very borderline of human existence. Indeed, the fourth of the “Razglednicas” (‘razglednica’ is Serbian for postcard), written a few days before his death, freezing the image of his own murder at the hands of his guards, articulates the tragedy of senseless death from a point virtually beyond that border. The manuscript of the last poems has become a symbolic object joining poetry and life, poetry and death in a unique manner. The poems were written in a notebook found on the exhumed body of the murdered poet and contained the following text in five languages (the opening line of the English text is smeared and illegible): “[The finder is kindly requested to forward this notebook, which] contains the poems of the Hungarian poet Miklós Radnóti to Mr. Gyula Ortutay, Budapest university lecturer, Budapest, VII. Horánszky u. 1. I. Thank you in anticipation.”<sup>3</sup>

The significance that Radnóti has for world literature is shown by the fact that even though a Hungarian link can be traced behind virtually all the published translations of his poems, his poetry has nevertheless transcended cultural barriers and entered international literary consciousness. One token of this is the fact that Carolyn Forché, in her anthology *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness*, refers to Radnóti as a major Hungarian poet of the Holocaust,<sup>4</sup> along with admittedly better-known figures such as Paul Celan, Nelly Sachs, Primo Levi and Tadeusz Borowski. What raises Radnóti’s oeuvre beyond the realm of Holocaust testimony alone is that the viewpoint adopted in his conceptually authoritative texts is not retrospective. He was productive throughout his three spells of labour service; his poems and the diary that he kept with meticulous care are extraordinary attempts to place poetry and life side by side. His last poems, and in particular the one entitled “Fragment” written on 19 May 1944, the day before he left to report for his third spell of forced labour, and the works in the *Bor Notebook* were not the products of an unexpected, inexplicable burst of creativity. From his adolescence on, Radnóti deliberately built his life-work as a tightly woven web of themes and motifs.

On examining the entire oeuvre, it is striking how Radnóti’s prose, the diary, his essays and his reviews each form a self-contained unity, but this is all in the service of an inner unity of the poetic works. At the start of his career he published two volumes (1930 and 1931) of uneven but nonetheless interesting

1 ■ *Foamy Sky. The Major Poems of Miklós Radnóti*. Sel. and tr. by Zsuzsanna Ozsváth and Frederick Turner. Budapest: Corvina, 2000, p. 213. All quotations from Radnóti’s poems, unless otherwise indicated, are from this edition.

2 ■ Miklós Radnóti, *Bori notesz* [Bor Notebook]. Budapest: Helikon, 1970.

3 ■ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

4 ■ “Introduction”, in *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness*, ed. Carolyn Forché. London & New York: W. W. Norton, pp. 31 and 33–34.



poems, whereas the blustering tone of his third volume, *Lábadozó szél* (Convalescent Wind, 1933), proved to be a dead end in his creative output. All the same, a detailed analysis of the volumes shows that even before he was fully fledged as a poet Radnóti strove for a mature concept. His compositional flair was of a high order, even if it was not uncommon to find uncertainties in poetics, metre and tone. Thus, a cycle of poems within a given volume, or the positioning of poems within each cycle, and the arch of motifs within a poem, all contribute to form a closed architectonic system. Indeed, it is noticeable that the volumes build on one another, with poems situated at the definitive places (primarily, of course, the opening and closing poems) referring to each other, so that, even though the early verses, as poetry, may be open to criticism, structurally speaking they nevertheless constitute a soundly uniform oeuvre.

One conspicuous characteristic of this lyrical oeuvre as a whole is its economy and the unbroken arch of its inner development. In moving on from his early, more experimental period, Radnóti incorporated into his mature poetry any aspects that he considered usable. The most revealing example is the bucolic tone that he hit on early on, in the very first volume entitled *Pogány köszöntő* (Pagan Invocation). From the mid-thirties this was continued, suitably transformed, in the love idylls in the garden on Istenhegy ("God's Hill") in Buda, and it found its culmination during the final years in a series entitled "Eclogues". The consistency of point of view represents a similar continuity in his nature poems: they are observations of minute incidents, the perspective being that of a person bending down to make a close scrutiny of objects, glimpsing the universal in the microcosm of a trifle. That is summed up by the final line—"Just look at the small ripples of the world"—of the 1941 poem "Rain Falls, It Dries Up"<sup>5</sup>.

In addition to the unity of composition and perspective, the cohesion of the whole oeuvre is also reinforced by the way that Radnóti kept on putting forward, again and again, an element—an image, a word or metre—seemingly of slight importance, but in the process acquiring multiple meanings. One example is the motif of the drool or saliva of a calf, bull or ox, which makes an appearance altogether three times in the poems. The first time is in the first cycle of *Pogány köszöntő*, in the poem that gives the volume its title: "*The mild calf dripping with saliva / follows our wagon still.*"<sup>6</sup> The next comes at what may be considered the midpoint of the life-work, the poem "Like a Bull," which opens the 1935 volume *Újhold* (New Moon), in which the young bull, "*weaves in his play a foamy banner of spittle.*"<sup>7</sup> Then, close to the end, in "Razglednica (3)", we find: "*The oxen drool saliva mixed with blood.*"<sup>8</sup> (One should note that

5 ■ Miklós Radnóti, *Clouded Sky*. Tr. by Steven Polgár, Stephen Berg, and S. J. Marks. New York: Harper & Row, 1972, p. 24.

6 ■ *Foamy Sky*, p. 11.

7 ■ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

8 ■ *Ibid.*, p. 211.



Radnóti used the same word, saliva, in all three cases.) These three metaphors correspond precisely to the three phases of the poet's life.

Radnóti shaped his poetry in a state of continual creative readiness, which no doubt goes a long way to explaining the exceptional circumstance that even under severe physical duress in which most people's energies would be exhausted simply by the trials of survival he managed to produce works that represent the apex of his poetic craft. One reason Radnóti's poems are assured of an exceptional place in world literature is, indeed, the fact that he was able to mobilise his creative energies up till the very end. Of course, it is blind good fortune that the last poems, including "Root" and the four "Razglednicas," survived at all, given that the sole source is the notebook that was found when his body was exhumed.

**F**rom the mid-thirties on, in point of fact, the inevitability of his own violent end was the main subject of Radnóti's poetry. His consciousness of death in adulthood, as we know it from the poems, had been conditioned by a childhood experience of the trauma of death. It was a trauma in the sense of being the kind of sudden, unexpected and wrenching psychological scar to which a person's mind is incapable of adapting and which therefore causes profound changes of personality. On the evidence of the handwritten exercise books of poetry that he produced in adolescence, it was this extreme childhood trauma that prompted him to turn to writing. For three years following the death of his father, when he was twelve, the full dimensions of his family's tragedy were gradually revealed to him, bit by bit; the fact that when he was born his mother and a twin brother had died. In his early verse he attempted to formulate how the loss of both parents had affected his personality, using poetry for psychological self-healing, a form of therapy for his injured sense of personal identity. As the process of assimilating the trauma of the experience of death gradually came to an end with the 1936 volume *Járkálj csak, halálraítélt!* (Just Walk On, Condemned to Die!), his awareness of his personal mortality grew stronger, to the point that it took over as the leitmotif in the volume *Meredek út* (Steep Road, 1938) and the late poems. In this way, Radnóti deliberately integrated the tragedies of his childhood into the structuring of his personality. He looked on poetry as a terrain in which he could come to terms with the irrevocable losses that he had suffered. This layer of his poetry is a confessional lyric with a therapeutic function, and in truth in assimilating his trauma he not only resolved his psychological difficulty, he also created himself as a poet. That is why a very particular relationship with death emerged, and from the mid-thirties onwards he was the first and, to all intents, the only one among his contemporaries who sensed the danger that was, in the end, to destroy him. An awareness of death became for him, in his poetry, an existential problem.

In that sense Radnóti's poetry was a tremendous experiment in linguistic self-construction. He was searching for an answer to what is perhaps the greatest of all questions of poetry in the European tradition, namely, what kind of connection



exists between a poet's personal life and the works that he (or she) creates, and whether it is possible to construct a poet's personality through language. Is it possible to formulate in language the problems of existence in such a way that the process of formulation becomes a work of art in its own right? That is to say, can a unity of being and writing, life and literature, be constructed?

One direct consequence of this is that Radnóti's poetry acutely asks whether it is possible for an identity to be chosen freely. His own fate and poetry attest unequivocally to its being the inalienable right of an autonomous person to select his (or her) own identity. In the specific political milieu in which he lived in Hungary this was not possible. The Hungarian state after the First World War denied him that right; indeed, it insisted on its own right to stamp an identity on him. It was a conflict that was to have a tragic outcome. By then, however, the state had already symbolically denied him the right to choose his identity through the complications that were thrown up over his wish to change his name to Radnóti. The authorities responded in 1934 by high-handedly changing his own choice to "Radnóczy", making it clear that the prevailing powers reserved for themselves the right to decide his identity.

**T**he answer that Radnóti's poetry gave to the question of identity being a matter of linguistic self-construction was in a form akin to what is now called confessional poetry. This is a category by which literary history designates a group of poets—mainly American poets of the late 1950s and 1960s, including John Berryman, Randall Jarrell, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and others—who consciously used their poetry to work out, both in and through it, traumas that they had suffered, for the most part in childhood.<sup>9</sup> As such, confessional poetry looks back on a substantial tradition in both historical and aesthetic terms, with its immediate precursor lying in the Romantic ideal of the poet as prophet and seer. Its roots, however, stretch back much further. Thus, in Plato's view (in *Ion*) poets, by their very nature, are unpredictable and dangerous because their actions subvert sound common sense. Being confessional does not however necessarily entail the poet's acceptance of the role of being damned to self-destruction: Radnóti was far from adopting that notion. His poetry, as in the case of the "Fragment" of May 1944, directly contradicts Plato, in that he asserts, in the opening verse, that he himself, as poet, represents normality in an age of lunacy. The American postwar confessional school in fact shows many common features with certain creative efforts in the Hungarian lyric poetry of the 1930s and 1940s, first and foremost those of Lőrinc Szabó (1900–57), Attila József (1905–37) and Radnóti. It is perhaps no accident that a poetic approach arose in Budapest that anticipated the methods adopted by the American confessional school, given that in the early years of the twentieth century the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and specifically its twin capital

9 ■ Jeffrey Meyers, *Manic Power: Robert Lowell and His Circle*. London: Macmillan, 1987, pp. 1–2.



cities of Vienna and Budapest, were the centres of Freudian psychiatry, indeed the epicentres of its influence before it began to blossom in America. It was in the United States, however, that confessional literature was first named as such, for it was there that the everyday application of psychology most permeated all aspects of intellectual life as it became a widely used therapy.<sup>10</sup>

Hungarian and American confessional poetry are situated at the two poles of a temporal axis that spans the cultural crisis manifested in the Second World War. The Hungarian variety emerged in the pre-Auschwitz era under an authoritarian political regime that was eventually to grade into open Nazi dictatorship, whereas its American counterpart unfolded in a period of liberal democracy in the post-Auschwitz era. Accordingly, it is broadly the case that Hungarian poets were more deliberately political, the Americans more psychologically oriented.

Radnóti's poetry is strongly distinct from that of the American school insofar as he did not use psychotherapeutic methods to analyse himself, although he demonstrably read several of Freud's works and even read psychology while he was at university. Thus, he did not adopt either a Freudian or other psychological approach to analyse his consciousness, his situation or his life in his poetry, nor did he put forward as an explicit programme his need to construct himself or build his personality. Yet his lyric and prose works achieved precisely that end. His poetry is most nearly akin to that of Sylvia Plath or Anne Sexton among the postwar American confessional poets, given that the latter two also drew on images of the Holocaust to express events that were critical for their own lives and identities. More specifically, they had a clear sense that modern, industrialised genocide had deeply shaken the moral foundations on which human civilisation is based.

**T**his was essentially the problem that Radnóti himself confronted over the course of his brief creative career, which spanned barely fifteen years. It overshadowed his life both before and during the war, and was of course the direct cause of his death. The idea that a person is a unique individual (the great accomplishment of Renaissance humanism) was sunk, the concept of the ego shattered. The big question that confessional poetry faced was therefore whether an ego that had been emptied of meaning and demolished could be rebuilt by aesthetic means. When it is opposed by sociopolitical forces, the ego is incapable of creating itself and so is forced into the role of victim. But for the personality forced into victimhood it is the process of victimhood itself that becomes his (or her) main subject, since he or she embodies the general crisis of civilisation in his or her fate. Radnóti's intertwined life and poetry are a response, therefore, to a historical crisis that was experienced at a very personal level.

In the process of (re)constructing his self in language, Radnóti had to clarify a number of readily definable conceptual areas of inquiry, with four interrelated spheres of thought playing a part in his self-definition: his relationship to his

10 ■ *Ibid.*, p. 15.



Jewishness, his Catholicism, his political leftism, and his sense of being Hungarian. In the thinking of his own times, the pairings of Hungarian-Jewish, Jewish-Catholic, and Catholic-Communist (or Marxist or left-winger) were generally regarded as mutually exclusive polar opposites in defining an individual's identity, yet Radnóti strove to resolve these antitheses within his own personality.

Not a trace is to be found of Radnóti ever having received a Jewish religious upbringing. Nevertheless there are numerous references in his letters and diary entries to his Jewishness, and more generally to Judaism and Jewish culture, suggesting that he was acutely concerned with them, even if all signs indicate that he did not feel any ties to the traditions of Hungarian Jewry.<sup>11</sup> He considered Jewish culture in much the same way as he did the culture of antiquity—a value that was part of the cultural heritage, indeed a mainspring, of mankind, but according to his way of thinking it was only possible to relate to it as a tradition, not something to be pursued as a living intellectual force. On the other hand, for Radnóti total assimilation meant abandoning Judaism in any shape or form, for (and this may seem something of a surprise from the perspective of today) he did not accept the notion of a dual identity. He believed in unconditional assimilation, and in that respect his approach was very much of a piece with the pre-First World War era. It is symptomatic that the word “Jew” is used only twice in his poetry: the first instance is in a jocular extemporisation about Heinrich Heine, dated Christmas 1939 but not published during his lifetime, which was conceived as an outburst against literary anti-Semitism, while the second occurs in “The Seventh Eclogue”, where Jewry is listed as just one of several ethnic groups. In neither case is the word used to refer directly to himself.

He was drawn to Catholicism from his years in secondary school onwards, but this was also the time his left-wing convictions were firmly established, and to the end of his life he did not regard the two as clashing. Radnóti was not a deeply-read Marxist. His knowledge was based purely on second-hand sources; the essence of his leftist views was a sense of social justice based on the principles of equality and solidarity between human beings. His Marxism (or at least what he conceived as being Marxism) was therefore emotional, because he did not join any left-wing party. Indeed, he was highly critical of the illegal Communist movement, but he looked on Jesus as a social revolutionary. Biblical or Christian religious motifs crop up frequently in his verse, though it should be noted that references to Old Testament prophets proliferated, particularly in the last phase of his life.

Radnóti was a lot more reserved in the way he handled his sense of Hungarianness or national consciousness; except in one instance, he did not consider this a subject fit for poetry. It is indicative that the word “*magyar*” occurs only three

11 ■ Győző Ferencz, *Radnóti Miklós élete és költészete* [Life and Poetry of Miklós Radnóti]. Budapest: Osiris, 2005, p. 171 and p. 259; Miklós Radnóti, *Ikrek hava—Napló* [Gemini—Diary]. Budapest: Osiris, 2003, p. 187.



times in his poetry, the last occasion being in 1932. The poetic summation of his sense of nationality is a January 1944 poem with the opening words "I know not what...", in the 36 lines of which the words *haza* ("homeland"), *hon* (a somewhat archaic term also meaning homeland in the spiritual sense, but with more wistful overtones), *táj* (lands or landscape), *föld* (soil), or some compound or variant of these, occur fourteen times. At first sight the poem fits comfortably into a long series of major patriotic Hungarian poems in the Romantic tradition, but unlike its precursors it does not promote any outstanding events of national history, but rather a personal bond to a geographically definable region as the dominant factor in forming a sense of nation. This also explains the inherent paradox that a concern about the destruction of war was his prime reason for writing the poem, but the airplanes whose bombs he feared might fall on his much-loved countryside were machines of the liberating Anglo-American forces. That is not articulated in the text, of course, for in fact Radnóti wanted nothing more fervently than liberation from the Nazi rule of terror; "I Know Not What..." takes a worm's eye view of the matter, and thereby, paradoxically, strips it of its concrete specifics and raises it to a general level.

The great accomplishments of Radnóti's mature poetry spring from this intellectual field of force. From the latter half of the 1930s, a whole series of major compositions attained a supremely high level of linguistic self-construction. His created identity, however, was in serious conflict with the outside world, as is signalled by the duality of an awareness of death overshadowing the love idyll all the way through his mature poetry. He learned very early on as a poet to find a valid way of expressing his growing awareness of death: "And daily I live with newborn horrors," he wrote in "Broken Elegy"<sup>12</sup> as early as 1933. Before long a recurrent vision of his own death as a poet appears with almost obsessive regularity in his poems, and it is easy to see why: if Radnóti's poetry is truly an attempt to construct the self in language, then the poet's death is bound to crush the attainment of that attempt. Radnóti speaks of his own death, or the deaths of other poets, in some four dozen poems, not including poetry in which death is not referred to in a personal context. Taken together, then, motifs of death, or a presentiment of or anguish about death are to be found in close to half of the poems of the complete oeuvre.

This necessarily means that with the growing consciousness of death, in ever more poems faith in the power of verbal expression is shattered. One of the very last poems, "Eighth Eclogue", written in the forced labour camp at Bor, is essentially, from its first line to the last, an internal debate on the sense or senselessness of poetic expression and the power of the word. Radnóti's self-searching doubts about poetic expression are an index of the inner struggle that he had to carry on in the process of constructing his self in language, with poetry increasingly coming into being almost in the face of its own justification.

12 ■ Miklós Radnóti, *The Complete Poems*. Tr. by Emery George. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Ardis, 1980, p. 126.



That is certainly true of poetry in the *Bor Notebook*. Here, though, the poems are inseparable from the circumstances in which they were written and the story of the fate of the notebook itself: these are poems composed on what was literally Radnóti's own death march, but the fact that the notebook nevertheless did eventually re-emerge from a mass grave is surely a peerless example of the triumph of a poet's creative power over even self-liquidation. The ten poems of the *Bor Notebook* indeed evoke that double edge in their choice of subject matter, with the tainted or corrupt quality of life being repeatedly contrasted with the undiminished quality of verse.

An exceptional example is "Razglednica (4)", Radnóti's very last poem, written four days before he died but transcending the physical impossibility of giving an account of witnessing his own death. This is an antinomy that Radnóti resolves by setting it in metonymic relation to the death of a companion: he is literally at his side when a fellow prisoner is executed; he slumps to the ground next to his dead companion. Thus, the fate of the two men may be separated for the moment, but through transference based on literal body contact Radnóti becomes a participant in his companion's death: when he reports on it he is reporting on his own death. That ambiguity is displayed in the fact that the text allows different interpretations depending on whether the German phrase "*Der springt noch auf*" (i.e. "He's still leaping up"), which appears in the penultimate of the seven lines, is taken to imply that the poet will be given a reprieve or, on the contrary, is to be shot. The first interpretation is that in the course of the march anyone who was capable of walking still had a chance of surviving but those who became incapable of walking, and so fell behind, were shot out of hand. The freezing of the image in the last line ("*Blood mixed with mud was drying on my ear*")<sup>13</sup> hints at the second meaning. That is supported by the specifics of the poem's origin, because the actual event that triggered the writing of "Razglednica (4)" was the death of Miklós Lorsi, a café musician from Budapest, who served along with Radnóti in the forced-labour service and, according to eye-witness accounts, was shot after the German cry was shouted out. Yet Radnóti's narrative disrupted the chronological order. Of course, this again, for one last time, draws attention to the simultaneous duality and unity of life and poetry in Radnóti's life-work. In this last poem Radnóti used each and every motif of Lorsi's death, but the text that emerged was not a description of Lorsi's death, authentic down to the very last detail, but the poet's vision of his own death. In the final line the blood that denotes life is mingled with inanimate mud. Poetic imagination took the stuff of human flesh turning to dust to construct a final metaphor: the process of linguistic self-construction is completed in physical annihilation. 🍀

13 ■ *Foamy Sky*, p. 213.



Miklós Radnóti

## Poems

### *Peace, Dread*

(*Béke, borzalom*)

*I went out, closed the street door, and the clock struck ten,  
on shining wheels the baker rustled by and hummed,  
a plane droned in the sky, the sun shone, it struck ten,  
I thought of my dead aunt and in a flash it seemed  
all the unliving I had loved were flying overhead,  
with hosts of silent dead the sky was darkened then  
and suddenly across the wall a shadow fell.  
Silence. The morning world stood still. The clock struck ten,  
over the street peace floated: cold dread was its spell.*

(1938)

*Translated by Zsuzsanna Ozsváth and Frederick Turner*

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#### **Miklós Radnóti (1909–1944)**

*is one of the most translated Hungarian poets. This selection, commemorating the 100th anniversary of his birth, is intended to show how his poetry has been kept alive by contemporary British and American poets. Clare Pollard's versions were commissioned for this issue. Stripped-back and edgy, they convey the sense of horror radiating from the two poems. Peace, Dread was written at the time when anti-Jewish legislation was being introduced in Hungary and Forced March not long before Radnóti's death in early November 1944.*

*The latter was among the poems in the notebook found in his coat pocket when his body was exhumed.*

*The translation by Edwin Morgan was published in The New Hungarian Quarterly (Autumn 1969, No. 36). The others were taken from the following sources: Modern Classics from Hungary (Hungarian Book Foundation, 2001, 33); Foamy Sky. The Major Poems of Miklós Radnóti. Selected and edited by Zsuzsanna Ozsváth and Frederick Turner (Princeton University Press, 1922); The Photographer in Winter by George Szirtes (Secker and Warburg, 1986); and Forced March. Selected Poems by Miklós Radnóti. Translated by George Gömöri and Clive Wilmer (Enitharmon Books, 2003).*

# Peace, Horror

(Béke, borzalom)

*When I stepped out through the gate, it was just ten o'clock,  
A baker sped by on gleaming wheels, a song on his lips,  
A plane droning high overhead and the sun up, it was ten,  
And my dead aunt came into my mind and with that they were all  
Flying above me—those whom I love and who are not alive—  
Darkly across the sky, a host of silent dead...  
Then, a jolt, and a shadow crumpled against the wall.  
Silence. The morning came to a halt on the stroke of ten:  
Hovering over the street, peace—and a certain horror.*

(1938)

*Translated by George Gömöri and Clive Wilmer*

# Peace, Horror

(Béke, borzalom)

*When I stepped through the door, it was ten.  
Wheels shining, a baker sped by; he sang.  
A plane hummed high, the sun shone, it was ten,  
my dead aunt came into my mind, and then  
all my lost were above me, my beloved dead  
darkening the sky in mute armies, so many—  
a shadow fell, sudden; it covered the walls.  
Silence. The morning stopped. It was ten.  
There was peace in that street, and horror.*

(1938)

*Translated By Clare Pollard*



# Forced March

(Eróltetett menet)

Crazy when safe on the ground    to get up and walk again—  
the man stirs knees and ankles    like some galvanized thing of pain,  
but still he follows the road,    you'd think he'd wings to lift him,  
and the ditch is not his friend,    he daren't be a drifter,  
and if you ask why not,    he'll maybe tell you yet  
he has a wife in wait for him    and a less mad, ugly death.  
What a crazy piety    when yonder now for ages  
hearth and home have blistered    to the dry wind raging,  
house-walls struck flat,    the plum-tree bare,  
and night on the homestead    crawling with fear.  
O if I could believe it—    not only my heart  
holding what I must hold to,    but a home, waiting late:  
could it be yet! as once    on the old cool porch  
the bees of peace hummed    while plum jam grew rich,  
and late summer stillness    baked in the sleepy garden,  
fruits rocked naked    in the leaves, and Fanni  
stood with her fair hair    by the tawny hedgerow,  
and the slow morning    slowly tracked its shadow—  
but this can still be!    the moon is so round tonight!  
Stay, wait, my friend,    shout at me! I'm on my feet!

Bor, 15 September 1944.

Translated by Edwin Morgan

# Forced March

(Erőltetett menet)

A fool he is who, collapsed, rises and walks again,  
Ankles and knees moving alone, like wandering pain,  
Yet he, as if wings uplifted him, sets out on his way,  
And in vain the ditch calls him back, who dare not stay.  
And if asked why not, he might answer —without leaving his path—  
That his wife was awaiting him, and a saner, more beautiful death.  
Poor fool! He's out of his mind: now, for a long time,  
Only scorched winds have whirled over the houses at home,  
The wall has been laid now, the plum-tree is broken there,  
The night of our native hearth flutters, thick with fear.  
Oh if only I could believe that everything of worth  
Were not just in my heart— that I still had a home on earth;  
If only I had! As before, jam made fresh from the plum  
Would cool on the old verandah, in peace the bee would hum,  
And an end-of-summer stillness would bask the drowsy garden,  
Naked among the leaves would sway the fruit-trees' burden,  
And Fanni would be waiting, blonde, by the russet hedgerow,  
And the slow morning painted slow shadow over shadow—  
Could it perhaps still be? The moon tonight's so round!  
Don't leave me friend, shout at me: I'll get up off the ground!

Bor, 15 September 1944.

Translated by Clive Wilmer and George Gömöri



# Forced March

(Erőltetett menet)

*He's foolish who, once down, resumes his weary beat,  
A moving mass of cramps on restless human feet,  
Who rises from the ground as if on borrowed wings,  
Untempted by the mire to which he dare not cling,  
Who, when you ask him why, flings back at you a word  
Of how the thought of love makes dying less absurd.  
Poor deluded fool, the man's a simpleton,  
About his home by now only the scorched winds run,  
His broken walls lie flat, his orchard yields no fruit,  
His familiar nights go clad in terror's rumpled suit.  
Oh could I but believe that such dreams had a base  
Other than in my heart, some native resting place;  
If only once again I heard the quiet hum  
Of bees on the verandah, the jar of orchard plums  
Cooling with late summer, the gardens half asleep,  
Voluptuous fruit lolling on branches dipping deep,  
And she before the hedgerow stood with sunbleached hair,  
The lazy morning scrawling vague shadows on the air...  
Why not? The moon is full, her circle is complete.  
Don't leave me, friend, shout out, and see! I'm on my feet!*

Bor, 15 September 1944.

Translated by George Szirtes

# Forced March

(Eróltetett menet)

Absurd, when collapsing to get up again and walk,  
to be Pain itself, moving, using knee and ankle.  
He starts again, back as if he were a homing bird.  
Vainly, the ditch calls— he does not dare abide.  
Ask him: why not? Perhaps he'll make an answer,  
say his wife waits, or a death less ugly, saner,  
but the poor man's mad, for a long time now,  
above his home a singed wind has blown—  
the house is flat on its back, the plum-tree snapped,  
the night in this country is soft with dread.  
If only I could believe that things of worth  
are not just images I carry— are actually still in the world.  
If it were! If, as back then, beneath the porch's shelter  
the bees would hum, the plum-jam cool in jars,  
late summer silence bathe in sleepy gardens,  
naked fruits sway between the tree's leaves.  
If I knew my wife waited beside the hedgerow,  
and slow morning would slowly write the shadow—  
but perhaps it's still possible! The moon's so full tonight!  
Don't leave me, my friend, call to me! I'll try!

Bor, 15 September 1944.

Translated by Clare Pollard



Mónika Kumin

# The Silence of Discipline

The Art of Marta Pan<sup>1</sup>

A significant segment of the oeuvre of Marta Pan, who passed away in 2008, was created in the town of Saint-Rémy-les-Chevreuse, near Paris. Though Marta Pan's career in France has been the subject of numerous essays, books and catalogues, there is of yet no Hungarian-language publication on her oeuvre<sup>2</sup> and there had not been a single exhibiton of her work in Hungary since the retrospective in the Budapest Palace of Art in 1991. Most recently, the show at The Museum of Fine Arts (between July 7th–September 20th, 2009) devoted to her memory was a welcome occasion for reconsidering a large oeuvre. Eight monumental steel sculptures were on exhibit in the larger hall spaces of the Museum, together with three early drawings and three wood-models in one of the smaller rooms.

Marta Pan began her studies in private schools in Budapest. The Hungarian National Gallery preserves two small-scale plaster sculptures that are examples of her earliest known works.<sup>3</sup> The grey-brown painted figures create the impression of clay, and although they follow a classic positioning, their heads and bodies are modelled in a symbolic fashion. Here one can discern Pan's intention to "primitivise" and traces of a search for her own voice.<sup>4</sup> She enrolled

1 ■ This article is based on an essay published in the catalogue entitled *Pán Márta / Marta Pan*. (Mónika Kumin, *Marta Pan's Sculptures in the Museum of Fine Arts*", in Judit Geskó and Mónika Kumin eds., *Pan Marta / Marta Pan*. Budapest: Szépművészeti Múzeum, 2009, pp. 27–38.)

2 ■ Marta Pan and François Anssens eds., *Marta Pan*. Bern: Benteli, 2005; François Barré, *André Wogenscky, Marta Pan. L'oeuvre croisé*. Paris: Editions Cercle d'Art, 2007.

3 ■ *Seated Figure*, 1944, painted plaster (21x5x7.5 cm, inv. no. MML. 401); *A Couple*, 1944, painted plaster (27x9.5x5.7 cm, inv. no. MML. 402).

4 ■ The work entitled *Woman*—since destroyed—belonged to the artist's early, small painted plaster sculptures. See: *Szobrok—tervek—tájak. Pán Márta kiállítása* [Sculptures—Plans—Landscapes. A Marta Pan exhibition]. Palace of Art, Budapest, 9 May–16 June 1991. p. 110.

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**Mónika Kumin,**

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*She is the Acting Director of the Museum's Vasarely Museum.*

in a “general course” at the College of Fine Arts in the first and second semesters of 1945–46 as Márta Neumann.<sup>5</sup> Her teacher, the sculptor Pál Pátzay, was an advocate of legendarily conservative principles, and all she studied as a first-year student was drawing based on models and a few basic modelling tasks. *Head of a Woman with Her Hair in a Bun*<sup>6</sup> in the holdings of the Hungarian National Gallery was probably made during the year she spent at the college. This work in bronze demonstrates a degree of technical uncertainty, but it is precisely the oddities of its modelling that lend it expressive force. Pan’s first attempts—like those of the painter Simon Hantai—point in the direction of French art with Picasso looming in the background. They are characterised by emphatic contours, slightly robust modelling and an expressivity of figures.<sup>7</sup>

The start of Pan’s career coincided with one of the most eventful periods of Hungarian art, when non-figurative aspirations after the Second World War began to show themselves and cultural policy was radicalising with a shift to the left. Beginning in the spring of 1946 there was an uninterrupted period of one-man shows and group exhibitions by the European School<sup>8</sup>, and the *Galéria a 4 világtájhöz* (4 Cardinal Points Gallery) started with an exhibition of “abstracts”, arranged according to the ideas of the art critic Ernst Kállai and entitled *Új világnézet* (New World-View), in February 1947. Pan could have attended the “kindergarten” of the European School,<sup>9</sup> but perhaps because of her youth, or the conservatism of the College, she did not, or could not. Her discovery of “sculpture” was to be a result of her starting things anew in Paris.

Upon arriving in Paris in 1947, Pan almost immediately found herself among the Paris Hungarians, whose ties with one another varied from close to casual.<sup>10</sup> The key figures of the group were Etienne Beöthy, who had run the Cercle et

5 ■ On a college report dated 1 September, 1945, there is a note saying that “her surname was changed from Neumann to ‘Pán’”. Archives of the Hungarian University of Fine Arts 194. 1st semester of 1945–1946, 116. Archives of the Hungarian University of Fine Arts 196. 2nd semester of 1945–1946, 116.

6 ■ 1946, bronze (20x17x23 cm, signed on verso: “Pan 46”; inv. no. MML 400).

7 ■ Cf. *Elfeledett évtized. A 40-es évek* [A Forgotten Decade. The 40s]. Budapest: Ernst Museum, 2002. Exhibition catalogue.

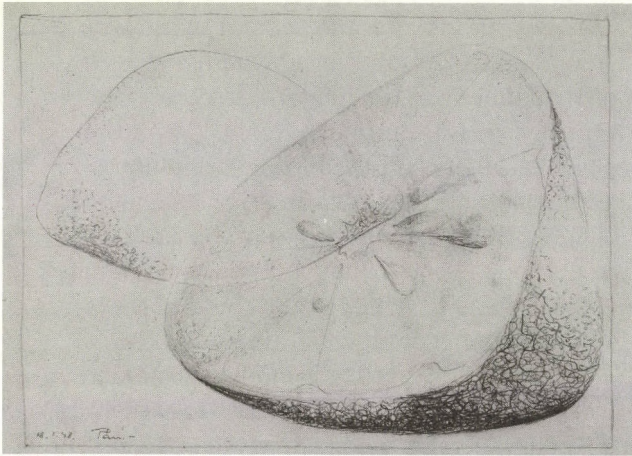
8 ■ A progressive group of artists (1945–1948), founded with the goal to introduce new tendencies of European art into Hungary, by Imre Pan, Árpád Mezei, Ernst Kállai and Lajos Kassák. Its members included Margit Anna, Jenő Barcsay, Endre Bálint, Béla Bán, Lajos Barta, Dezső Bokros Birman, József Egry, Erzsébet Forgács-Hann, Jenő Gadányi, Dezső Korniss, Tamás Lossonczy, Ferenc Martyn, Ödön Márffy, Ernő Schubert, Piroska Szántó, Júlia Vajda and Tibor Vilt. The influence of Lajos Vajda, the French Ecole de Paris, and late surrealism dominate in their art. Over the course of 1946 the non-figurative artists, under the leadership of Ernst Kállai, set off on an independent path with the establishment of Dunavölgyi Avantgárdok (The Avantgardists of the Danubian Valley) and later of Elvont Művészek Csoportja (The Group of Abstract Artists).

9 ■ Ildikó Nagy, “Hagyomány és megújulás. A magyar szobrászat fordulata az 1960-as években” [Tradition and Renewal. A Turn in Hungarian Sculpture in the 1960s]. *Ars Hungarica*, 2/1990, p. 250.

10 ■ For further information concerning the artists living in Paris see Júlia Cserba, *Magyar képzőművészek Franciaországban 1903–2005* [Hungarian Artists in France 1903–2005]. Budapest: Vince, 2006.



Carré since 1929 and Abstraction-Création since 1931 and had initiated joint exhibitions with the European School in 1947, and Etienne Hajdu, who was active in the Democratic Association of Hungarians in France and had begun teaching at the “academy” of Fernand Léger in 1947, the year of Pan’s arrival. As Pan mentioned in various interviews, Hajdu introduced her to Léger, at whose studio she spent a month. It was Léger who first drew her attention to the link between sculpture and architecture. She also went to the studio of Brancusi, of whose works the mobile *The Newborn* made the greatest impression on her. Finally she got to the office of Le Corbusier. It was here in 1949 that she met her husband-to-be, André Wogenscky, a Polish architect who ran the office.<sup>11</sup> From this point on she no longer had any formal training, but virtually started afresh



*Lemon, 1948*

as a self-taught artist, from a state of tabula rasa, as she put it herself.<sup>12</sup> She suspended her sculpting and began to draw plants, fruit and shells, trying to “understand and capture their essence and the ‘core’ of their forms”.<sup>13</sup> Three monumental drawings from a series produced in this period of seeking are in the Hungarian National Gallery. *Lemon* and *Composition* depict the rotation of the basic form and cross-section of a lemon into those of a shell, using dynamic contours and fine hatching, whereas *Onion* emphasises the shell structure of an onion from a characteristic viewpoint. The three drawings all reflect the artist’s attraction towards oval forms—characteristic of her entire oeuvre—and show her desire to capture the “essence of plasticity” in the structural depiction of objects. Although the compositions were made as imitations of nature, their dimensions, which far exceed life scale, exemplify a shift towards abstraction.

The styles of the three drawings should be placed in the wider context of André Masson, Francis Picabia and Pablo Picasso, a blend of a post-Cubist approach and the visual style of late Surrealism. Moreover, the principle of gradually “simplifying” natural forms and arriving at pure abstraction formed part of the

11 ■ Ferenc Bodri, “Híradás Pán Márta ’műtárgyairól’” [News of Marta Pan’s “Works of Art”]. *Új Írás*, March 1989, p. 53.; Endre T. Rózsa, “Kényes egyensúly. Franciaországi látogatás Pán Márta szobrászművésznél” [A Delicate Balance. A Visit to the Sculptress Marta Pan in France]. *Művészet*, March 1984, p. 41.

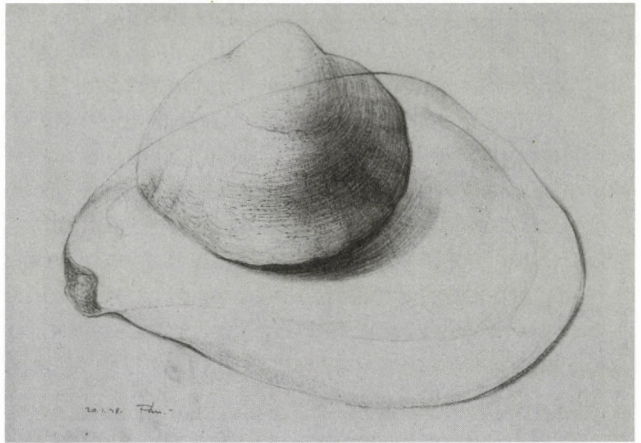
12 ■ Rózsa, p. 41.

13 ■ *Ibid.*



basic curriculum of alternative art education, thus it was most probably taught at the Léger "academy."<sup>14</sup>

The issue of "plastic essence", or "formal core", addressed in Pan's drawings, touches on one of the basic problems of modern sculpture.<sup>15</sup> The modernist sculpture of the sixties continued with two elements of the sculptural

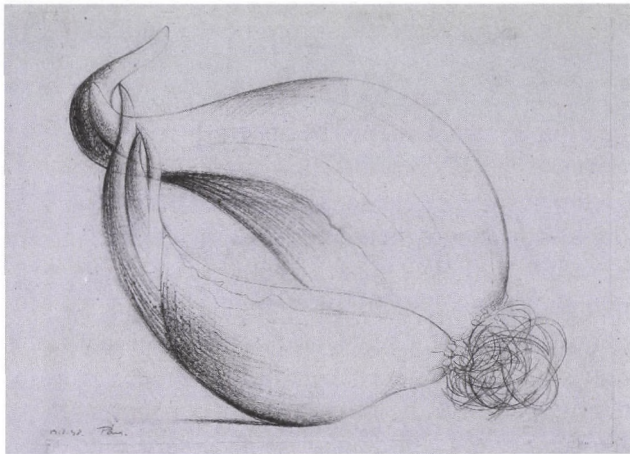


Composition, 1948

practice of the twenties: the principle of simplified and compact mass-forming derived from Maillol and the rejection of the concept of monolithic mass, that is, the accentuation of the potential moulding of space through limitation and abstraction of form, this being the legacy of the Russian Constructivists as formulated in the manifestos of Pevsner and Naum Gabo.<sup>16</sup>

Pan's "organic" period, which lasted from 1949 until the mid-sixties, was marked by a search for the aforementioned "plastic essence." The small sculptures of the fifties evoking

amorphous forms were a formal analysis of the structures of living forms, their growth and movement modelled in "living" materials (terracotta, clay) that best expressed these ideas. In 1952 she began making her first "joint" sculptures, reminiscent of the jawbone of an animal. The porous surface of her terracotta series entitled *Charnière* (Joint) looked as if it had



Onion, 1948

14 ■ This can be inferred from Robert Doisneau's 1937 series of photographs of Léger's studio in Paris. Cf. Robert Doisneau, *À l'imparfait de l'objectif. Souvenirs et portraits*. Arles: Actes Sud, 1995 (2nd edition).

15 ■ Cf. Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1977. pp. 39-69, p. 253.

16 ■ For more, see Alex Potts, "Modernist Sculpture", in *The Sculptural Imagination. Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist*. New Haven, London: Yale UP, 2000, pp. 145-158.



been formed by the processes of erosion. The "assembly mark" is the basic element that ensures the construction's movement and allows the parts to come together and form a unit. The body hides its own centre. It is perhaps in this period that Pan came the closest to the forties' works of Barbara Hepworth (to whom she is often compared) and the non-figurative sculptures of Henry Moore.<sup>17</sup> Her sculpture bears out Moore's premise of "truth to the material." In the case of Moore and Hepworth, materiality served the illusion of organisms that grow from a central core and exist unto themselves. It reflects a sculptural approach in which the process of creation of form follows the logic of organic growth. As Moore put it, "A work can have a pent-up energy", and can give the impression of organic growth drawn by inherent forces.<sup>18</sup> The vitalist approach, which combined the metaphor of organisms with a constructivist aesthetic (principally in the wake of the sculpture of Brancusi and Jean Arp) was regarded as a visual topos in the Paris of the fifties.

This can be seen in the oeuvre of Beöthy and Hajdu, both of whom continued in the manner of the Abstraction-Création group, whose work shows an affinity with that of Pan's early period.<sup>19</sup>

Pan made *Teck*, her first large work, which at the same time was the first to achieve major success, in 1956. This especially hard teak sculpture modelled an elongated jaw form enlarged on a huge scale and openable from the side. It was essentially a monumental version of her "joint" constructions, which, due to its size, requires considerable space. Its jaw shape is associated with something living; however, when moved, it appears to be a cleverly structured object with an unknown function. It eventually found its "place" as the "partner" of the dancers in a similarly titled choreographÿ by Maurice Béjart (*Le Teck*, 1956). Later, *Equilibre* (Equilibrium), made in 1958, was specifically commissioned by Béjart. This organic sculpture rests on a metal axis and can be bent in every direction, its double cavity serving as the negative into which the positive of the dancers' bodies fit. When moving, the "body" thus created loses its balance at times and regains it at others. Pan, who had experience in dance<sup>20</sup>, found that balance was a common problem in dance and sculpture. The arched lower masses of her three "equilibre" models carry the potential of moving out of balance, but the moment they are tipped out of balance they immediately seek their own equilibrium and settle into place.

The appearance of sculptures on stage can be linked to the concept of (extended) temporality in postwar sculpture. Numerous sculptures served as

17 ■ Henry Moore's retrospective exhibition opened in December 1949 at the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris.

18 ■ James Phillip ed., *Henry Moore on Sculpture: a Collection of the Sculptor's Writings and Spoken Words*. London: Macdonald, 1966. pp. 69-70.

19 ■ In his work on the abstract art of the Ecole de Paris Michel Ragon interprets Pan's organic sculptures—similarly to Arp's and Pevsner's—as having a symbolic form alluding to sexuality. Michel Ragon, *Das Abenteuer der Abstrakten Kunst*. Darmstadt: Luchterhand Verlag, 1957, p. 141.

20 ■ Cf. Rózsa, p. 43.



accessories or played “roles” in theatrical productions.<sup>21</sup> In this context the sculpture was a kind of “actor” whose “character” was embedded in the temporality of the theatrical plot from which it unfolded and defined the surrounding space through “gestures” unfolding in time. This problem is approached from a technical aspect (and from the position of the “creator” artist imitating the hidden structure of nature) through various kinetic constructions, from Moholy-Nagy’s *Light-Space-Modulator* to Nicholas Schöffer’s cybernetic sculptures.

It is perhaps worth mentioning in this context that the concept of organic structures created by man is a basic tenet of the theory of “purism” expounded by Edouard Jeanneret (Le Corbusier) and Amédée Ozenfant. In their manifesto of 1920 they sought to “purify” modern visual culture through “mechanical selection”, modelling natural selection but based on the principles of functionality and economy.<sup>22</sup> Purism also forms the theoretical basis of Le Corbusier’s concept of the house as a “machine for living” expounded in his *Towards a New Architecture* (1923), which he regarded as the result of “high-class natural selection” solving the problems that arise from function and structure, and which he modelled on the steam engine, the aeroplane and the automobile. In connection to “harmony” created by machines—in line with his manifesto of 1920—Le Corbusier stressed that the beauty manifest in elemental and mathematical forms and “order” created with the correct proportions reproduces a sense of universal harmony. It could be regarded as symbolic that *Le Teck* was exhibited at the avant-garde festival arranged on the roof terrace of Le Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation in Marseille.<sup>23</sup>

**L**e Corbusier’s “machine for living” leads up to Pan’s group of architectural sculptures. Her first joint work with her husband, André Wogenscky, was the house they built in Saint-Rémy-les-Chevreuse in 1952–1953. The building, which is based on a square ground plan, was designed with the kitchen in its centre and spaces concentrically positioned around it. The design applied Le Corbusier’s Modulor system of architectural proportions, and the house was built in symbiosis with the natural environment. Pan mainly contributed to the project by designing the details of the kitchen and the roof terrace.<sup>24</sup> Wogenscky’s house in Saint-Rémy is a characteristic example of Le Corbusier’s “aesthetics of the engineer”. Planning work carried out in a state of “pure spirituality” creates the harmonies inferred from the laws of nature.

21 ■ For more, see Krauss, op. cit., pp. 201–220.

22 ■ Charles Edouard Jeanneret (Le Corbusier)–Amédée Ozenfant, “Purism”, in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood eds., *Art in Theory 1900–2000. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Malden–Oxford–Carlton: Blackwell, 2003, pp. 239–242.

23 ■ Festival d’Art d’Avant-Garde Marseille, 1956. Schöffer’s cybernetic sculpture, entitled *CYSPI*, was also exhibited here, again with Maurice Béjart’s choreography. Cf. Cserba, p. 110.

24 ■ A recent publication on the house: Barré, op. cit. pp. 71–76. “Külön utakon—együtt. Pán Márta szobrászművésszel Cserba Júlia beszélgetett” [On Separate Paths—Together. Sculptor Marta Pan in conversation with Júlia Cserba]. *Octogon*, 2007/6. pp. 25–28.



Beginning in the late sixties, Wogenscky's architectural practice using space and function as its starting point gradually ushered in a shift of emphasis in Pan's oeuvre from the necessities dictated by the material towards "conceptual forms." Of Pan's applied art produced between 1961 and 1967, those linked to Wogenscky's architectural designs deserve particular mention. The works designed for the Delft University of Technology (1962), the Saint-Antoine University of Paris (1964) and the Maine-Montparnasse in Paris (1965) were developed from her polyester *Spirale* (1960); they are rotatable works fastened to rods erected in highlighted points in space. Each composition is assembled from organic wooden elements. Despite their visible materiality the elements suspended above one another contradict the laws of gravity, since they almost seem to float in space. In this regard they can be regarded as the intermittent phase in Pan's approach to the problem of gravitation, which was first raised by her *Equilibre* models and perfected in her floating sculptures.

In her *Puzzle* series, which in 1964 consisted of small-scale models and later evolved to include public sculptures, she also addressed the problem of the "centre," but she placed the emphasis on how the object could be manipulated and the inherent playful elements. The parts of each of these works are joined together, but they can be disassembled all the way to the core of the composition, allowing for insight into the logical potentials inherent in the form of an object. Lambert compared the "logical form" of objects that can be disassembled to that of labyrinths.<sup>25</sup> Pan's interest in symbolic structures of an archaic type, which is palpable in these works, later found its fullest expression in her landscape architectural compositions and plans.

The "sensation" of a landscape made its appearance in the oeuvre of Pan in 1961 with the floating sculpture (*sculpture flottante*) planned for the sculpture park being built at the time for the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, in the Netherlands. The *Obero* consists of an elongated, convex bottom part and an umbrella-like top part. Thanks to the pivotal joint of the top part the sculpture can swivel as if it were following the direction of the wind. The large scale of the two parts was made possible through the use of light and durable polyester, a material which Pan had experimentally worked when making *Equilibre* and *Spirale*. In order to solve the structural problems that arose and to execute the work, she—following in Le Corbusier's footsteps—enlisted the help of French and Dutch naval engineers. The following decades saw floating sculptures launched on water in three continents, the outstanding white or red of the polyester sharply standing out from their environment and keeping the unity of form in such a way that the body became almost immaterial. The reflected image on the surface of the water in constant movement dissolves the solid material into a liquid state, its haptic

25 ■ Jean-Clarence Lambert, *Marta Pan. De la sculpture au paysage*. Paris: Editions Cercle d'art, 1994, p. 25.





Marta Pan: *Obero*, 1959



Marta Pan: *Gaiac I*, 1961





Marta Pan: *Garden of the White Line (Jardin de la Ligne Blanche)*, 1990. Osaka, Japan



Marta Pan: *Monument*, 2000. Atami, Japan

III

*The Silence of Discipline*



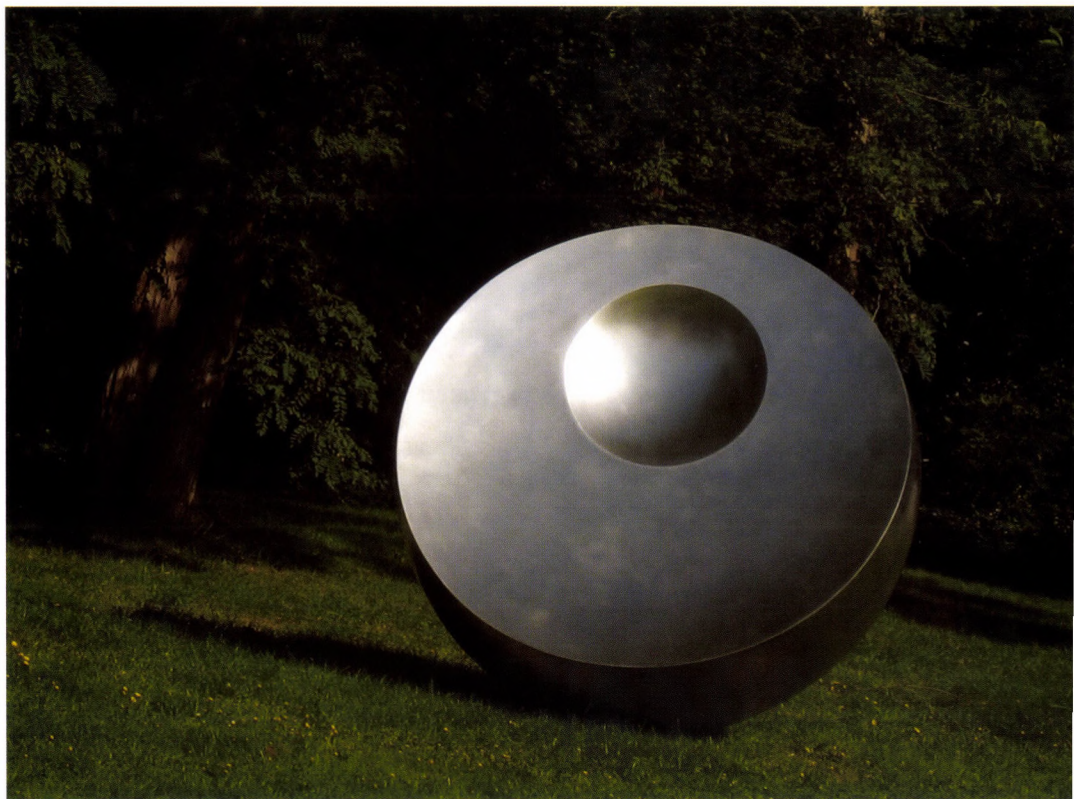


Marta Pan: *Arcs*, 1994. Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, France



Marta Pan: *Patio*, 1982. 26 Champs-Élysées, Paris, France





Marta Pan: *Cut Sphere (Sphère coupée)*, 1999



Marta Pan: *Project 516*, 2007. Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands

**VII**

*The Silence of Discipline*





Marta Pan: *Oblique Square (Carré oblique)*, 2006

quality becoming a spectacle. The work, at its best when viewed from the distance and “framed” by the landscape, functions as a pictorial (landscape) element.

As discussed above, the assertion of the priority of sculptural idea over the examination of the structure and growth of materials came to the fore in her oeuvre, especially in the case of her applied works. “My starting point is not the material,” Pan commented. “The material is subordinate. It has no other role in the sculpture than to launch an idea.”<sup>26</sup> A sculptural approach similar to hers does not so much start from the given qualities of a location but rather from the “conceptual form” conceived by the artist. She designed her “conceptual forms” in drawings made with the utmost precision. “I draw every detail of the sculpture on paper first. Exactly, with the precision of an engineer; recently I only tolerate a hundredth of a millimetre margin for error. My husband, who is an architect, implanted this need for precision in me. I decide what my sculpture will be in advance, and before I begin to implement the project I can already see what it will look like in space. I proceed in one direction throughout the whole process and change nothing along the way. I never improvise.”<sup>27</sup> Later she produced small-scale models, initially from wood and then from the beginning of the nineties from a material called Rohacell, a polyester derivative. The porous surface and broken white colour of the almost weightless yet solid Rohacell is highly reminiscent of plaster; however, it can be formed precisely, to best suit the given “conceptual forms”. Perhaps it is no exaggeration to suggest the presence of a constructivist approach here, with its emphasis on the priority of a conceptual centre dissolved from the material and that of the creative idea. Pan played in several registers of the modernist sculptural tradition and used it in Paris as her native idiom.<sup>28</sup>

**A**t the end of the sixties Pan broke away from organic sculpture and gradually turned towards geometric forms. It was at the beginning of the eighties that she made her first stainless steel sculptures and went on to work with marble as well as fibreglass. In addition to the use of “minimal” basic materials she continued to apply the logic of inherent necessity, as well as the principle of a compositional centre. Her new works were also closely linked to the landscape and the built environment where they were erected. The monumental “sculptural signs” placed in prominent places of the landscape or forming part of landscaped environments—as actually erected in Japan—are a unique group among her sculptures for public places. *Jardin de la Ligne Blanche* (1990) in Osaka and *Monument* (2000), erected in Atami by the Pacific, are archetypal forms (columns, gates, zikkurats, and labyrinths) which conjure associations with ancient

26 ■ János Frank, “Pán Márta”, in *Szóra bírt műtermek* [Studios Made to Speak]. Budapest: Magvető, 1975, pp. 326–27.

27 ■ *Ibid.* p. 325.

28 ■ Krauss, *op. cit.*, pp. 39–56.



architecture; they are "primeval prototypes" that carry the common essence of architecture and sculpture. Pan summarised her thoughts on this in a 1989 interview: "When man straightens up the trunk of a dead tree, a magical object is created: totem poles, idols or bench-marks, according to the will that determines his deed. Thoughts that give form to a memorial or 'reference point' endow objects with new energy and a life of a different meaning. The objects thus created by artistic intent occupy a living and dynamic place in space. They mediate between people and space, and between people and nature."<sup>29</sup> Her freestanding sculptures can also be linked to the modern problem of the monument. They are self-referential objects freed from the burden of representation; they are "pure sculptures" which—due to their monumental nature—are not disassociated from the logic of the sign.<sup>30</sup>

Beginning in the mid-eighties Pan's experiences of Mayan, Aztec and Egyptian architecture turned her attention to the creation of "reference points", i.e. places that were both sacred and functional at the same time. The problem of a "sculpted location," first raised by Brancusi's 1937 Târgu Jiu ensemble of monuments, was interpreted by her "urban landscape" design, realised in Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines between 1985 and 1997, as well as by the Rue de Siam project in Brest and *Patio* (1982), which she designed for the inner courtyard at 26 Champs-Élysées in Paris.<sup>31</sup> She captured the rhythm of the landscape by calculating the (visual) field of the observer and the precise composition of the visual elements, and often by radically redesigning the grounds. In her "landscape compositions," functional architectural sculpture becomes quasi-sacred and quasi-ritualistic spatial sculpture.

The effect of Pan's steel sculptures, set in a natural environment, can be best studied in the Saint-Rémy garden, which itself is like a testing ground, or a "landscape model". Her interest was generally aroused by the kind of "terrain" where the changing forms of nature themselves created the effect of sculptural modelling. Her works accentuate the natural substance of nature as if they were new qualities created out of the landscape. The—often two-part—works in the Saint-Rémy garden, set on a long, grassy slope, create visual nodes, interpreting the structure of the landscape. The observer will see the work from various viewpoints, and thus different contexts are emphasised within the landscape. Moreover, the overall sculptural form is also in constant motion, and new details emerge as the viewer walks around. The reflective surface of steel creates varying impressions depending on the time of day and the weather conditions. The strictness of the sculptural modelling and the colour

29 ■ Quoted by Bodri, p. 52.

30 ■ Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field", in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1985, p. 280.

31 ■ On Marta Pan's landscape and urban architecture designs see François Barré, "Marta Pan, a Sculptor and Architect", in Judit Geskó and Mónika Kumin, pp. 46–51.

and light effects appearing on the surface redefine the problems of immaterialisation and weightlessness, problems which are present in Pan's entire oeuvre.

Late-modern sculpture questions monumentality and durability, and places emphasis on instantaneity and the ephemeral nature of things, while attempting to subjugate materiality. With the endless oscillation between idea and material Pan touches on the ontological problem of sculpture.<sup>32</sup> Her sculptures set in public spaces and in nature are emblematic imprints of the "essence" of the site. The sculptural idea is also the inherent idea of place.

Eight monumental steel sculptures were on display at the show in the Museum of Fine Arts. It was intriguing to observe how sculptures originally designed for the panorama of the Saint-Rémy garden "behaved" in the passages and other spaces of the Museum : how works of gentle topography interacted with other works displayed within the closed architecture of the building. In fact, the positioning of the sculptures in the exhibition mirrored Pan's own concept as it took shape influenced by what she recalled as a truly memorable experience. She often recalled that one of her fondest memories was of visiting the Museum of Fine Arts in her childhood<sup>33</sup> where she saw the collection of plaster copies<sup>34</sup>, a display which had been part of the idea of the Marble and Renaissance halls. Due to their monument-like quality and by their sheer size the sculptures exhibited by Marta Pan at the show inadvertently brought the original context of these spaces, that of a Glyptotek, to life. 20.

32 ■ Krauss, op. cit., pp. 243–288.

33 ■ Frank, p. 324.

34 ■ Cf. e.g. *Régi gipszöntvények. Remekművek alteregói* [Old Plaster Casts. Alter Egos of Masterpieces]. An exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 24 June–31 December 1999, organised by János Eisler. Catalogue by Imre Takács.



László Krasznahorkai  
The Prisoner of Urga

Excerpt from the novel

Darkling Woods

1

**T**o pull into Beijing's Main Railway Terminus, to wriggle out of the filthy carriage, to spot in the vast crowd the person who has been sent to meet me, then entrusting myself to be driven away with him to the new embassy district, to take up there one of the suites that was vacant and therefore for rent, to make myself at home in the spacious rooms, to wash off the dust of the Gobi Desert, and finally to step out onto the balcony and, eyes closed, take a deep breath of the evening air of a Beijing autumn, then to look up at the sky and think, hey! so my story has begun—well, I have every reason (exceptionally, as compared with the generally mischievous treatment that travel books give to their material) to make this declaration, for this strict inventory of my arrival accorded with reality; indeed, not just the inventory but the outlined sequence of events in itself, which means that I am offering for perusal a literary work in which, for example, if the pulling-in comes before the wriggling-out, then you can bet your bottom dollar that in reality this pulling-in was indeed prior to the wriggling-out; in short, that in the feverish upheaval of the first hours everything, from the Main Railway Terminus to the spacious rooms, from the vast crowd to the washing-down, took place in accordance with what is written above, with the sole, but of course for me fateful difference that when, on stepping out onto the balcony, I really did look up at Beijing's evening stars,

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*Two of his novels, The Melancholy of Resistance (New Directions, 2002) and*

*War and War (New Directions, 2006) have been translated into English.*

*László Krasznahorkai's "Eastern novels" are reviewed on pp. 149–55 of this issue.*

then “hey! so my story has begun” was not at all what I was thinking, simply because exactly the opposite was the truth; that in fact it had not begun: in vain had the arrival duly taken place, in vain was I standing there on the balcony, bathed, ready, with the intention of promptly taking my gaze off the sky and the stars, and looking round from on high, with a solemn call in my soul with which my Beijing story might mark its start, but in vain, this story did not mark its start, because I was unable to take my eyes off the sky and the stars. I cannot say that only later, after initial hunches, did I, step by step, come to understand the significance of the moment; not at all, I dawdled about on the balcony, in the gentle caress of the breeze, looking at how the stars were sparkling over Beijing, and somehow I instantly recognised the undeniable significance of the moment, because in the same way as there is no matter of just recognising it, step by step, if, let’s say, one is sitting in the kitchen and the ceiling suddenly falls in, one knows it immediately and also says to oneself, “Hey, the ceiling’s fallen in on me!”; it was exactly the same with me, and I immediately grasped that hey! it seems I had to run off deep into the heart of China in order to understand what those (let us call them offhand) *very deep* questions are that precede me, and conversely, that hey! it seems it was a pity to run off to the heart of China, into non-immunity, where there is nothing to protect one when it comes down to it, when one is forced to confess that one’s life has reached a Dantesque turning-point—because what happened was that I was looking at the darkly sparkling sky over Beijing, and I recognised this Dantesque turning-point, but besides the ignominious simplicity of its content, I took fright at the almost operatic timing of this turning-point, and in the end I helplessly put up with it as announcing the total failure of my being, which was sighing for clarity, and these so-called *very deep* questions all at once—with a creaking and clattering—fell in on me. It was never decided that if I hadn’t come here as a tourist, and also not because, having got bored with the flavours back home, and regarding China as an exquisite sweet-shop of religious fanaticisms, I should look around for something to suck away at during my remaining days back home—so if it wasn’t for either the one or the other, then for what; but then what was decided was that behind my researches, suspecting indulgent absolution in ever-more inaccessible remoteness, behind the chain of questions I had posed to the world categorically lies a single certainty, which is that questions can be posed, and for that very reason now, at the very beginning, in the most literal sense of the word, of it all, the blinding clarity of these *very deep* questions acted on me with a near-overwhelming power, a clarity that—having reduced my being, which I considered extraordinarily complex, to a single tiny point—by switching on a light above us, has actually eliminated all the questions I had up till now, feeding on murk and at times directly on darkness, declaring that in fact there are no questions in a free approach as, for one thing, questionableness had no chance whatever in this world, since all that can be



experienced there is the flaring up and dying down of equal-ranking pronouncements, for a second, and looking more closely to us, because the question precedes the answer just as the beginning does the continuation, so to ask something and start something are one and the same thing, or in other words to pose a question is tantamount to starting the answer, but then again, what sort of question is prescribed by the answer; so then to ask, that is to say, to make inquiries, that is to say, by displaying an unceasing interest in rendering the very foundation of the interest impossible by, as it were, suffocating the unnameable object of that interest in the question-answer inclusion, and on top of that even breathing a sigh of relief after a particularly neat question-and-answer, as if everything were alright—in short, to do that is the well-deserved captivity that we can choose in the name of freedom; but then again, merely recognising the state before posing the question is, in itself, a *very deep* question, and we have thereby arrived at the further confession that can be deferred no longer, by now dawdling on the balcony: that, as a matter of fact, no definition of any kind fitted to these so-called, already much-mentioned very deep questions. Already then, dawdling on the balcony, and incapable of leaving it, it was clear to me that to no avail did I feel I was carried away by them, I was unable, and not going to be able, to specify what precisely those *very deep* questions are, because even if, after painfully lengthy contemplation, it might have been possible to make do with some poetic solution about their nature and velocity, for example, or their structure and product, namely, that their nature most resembled amorphous fears, and their velocity—the inner slowness of a motionless landscape; or their structure—“that of billowing fog in a valley”, and their product—“hunger after the disgust of a serious delusion”; well, even if it had been possible to venture such or other definitions on the basis that even though they might lead nowhere, they were still pleasing, to define their direction for instance, at least a single essential aspect of these *very deep* questions, was just as impossible as it would be—again purely for example’s sake—to say of a diving giant shark escaping into the depths, now then, where did that go, while sitting on the shore, intent, watching the ocean’s heaving mass. It was impossible, then, to make a decisive, unassailable, orientating comment about them; which is to say that beyond having a content that was unnameable, not couchable in words or intercalatable in language, and that would allow one to guess how radically, with what hostility, they resisted even a non-outlined plan for naming, couching in words, intercalating in language, beyond this consuming influence, I was really unable to say anything about their nature, but, at one and the same time, not to say anything about their nature yet to be perfectly clear about their nature, the two were entirely compatible in my mind on that first evening under the Beijing sky, looking at the stars of the heart of China in the cool of the balcony, and that is also how I left the balcony with the stars that, sensing the nature of the *very deep*



questions, with their help I had sorted out inside myself what I had already succeeded in working out from the dramatically timed extraordinary reception.

It is not that a question of, right up till then, my very good-naturedly calling this world indistinct, though I ought, very good-naturedly, to have called myself indistinct, but of my needing summarily to rectify the essence of the misjudgements of my heroic researches, foredoomed as they were to failure, and declare that I was not facing the Unknown but the Incomprehensible, I noted unceremoniously, quoting the words of a great scholar, and all at once setting everything I had on these two key notions of the double-entry book-keeping of his adolescent enthusiasm, thereby pitching into that spaciousness in which I suddenly found myself as I looked from the balcony up above at the sky. So, the Incomprehensible instead of the Unknown, I savoured the words, and by this savouring of the words I was already also getting a taste of the yawning despair behind these two words, for it was as if... I had crossed into another era by stepping out unsuspectingly onto the balcony to look at the stars; into another era, when the old, the obsessiveness of inexhaustible posing of questions, the pathos of fruitless assaults, where, after each and every unsuccessful attack, there was nevertheless the compensation of the searched-for dizzying, sweet, unheard-of attraction, of a research subject that was continually slipping from my grasp and therefore inapprehensible, precisely as a result of its inapprehensibility, and thus when this whole old era has been superseded by the bitterly new, in which a judgement on my searching intellectual expectation has already been passed in advance, which is that as research it is aimless, because its subject has disintegrated, whereas as intellectual expectation futile, because there is accordingly nothing to expect. I walked across the inner courtyard toward the entrance, and if not to a complete standstill, there was something in this formulation, maybe the thunderous parlance, or the slightly oppressive exaggeration of the judgement, that demanded that I should, if not come to a complete halt, at least slow my pace and not resign myself so easily to the possibly thunderous, possibly exaggerated first expressions that came to mind; so I did slow my pace, indeed almost—to a single cancelled movement from a total coming to a halt—came to a halt on the now slightly curving line of the inner courtyard of the embassy as, so to say, a visible sign of my need for a quite special concentration, and what, in the realisation that presented itself on the balcony, had set a new direction to my fate I took seriously; on the other hand, precisely because I was confronting it, I immediately wanted to free that realisation from the sweaty ornaments of the major generalities of otherwise understandable excitement. I said to myself in the inner courtyard, practically coming to a halt, I am prepared to sober up, and to desist forthwith from the assumption that the yearning I manifest in existence, which, along with others, and with a similarly modest restraint to theirs, I too have called my research, should have a



direction, and this direction has a mysterious axis, while this axis has a focal point and, finally, above this focal point there is a hovering angel whose authority keeps this focal point delicately in place, and it never moves away from this authority; just as I am prepared to efface from my head that, according to this flimsy assumption, I ought, with the impetus of my yearning, to draw near to this authority, ought to transilluminate it, then with a movement repeated thousands and thousands and thousands of times over, as one would measure out the sea with a single bucket, I ought to transfer it from unknownness... into a for us familiar territory... toward our own focal point. I said that I was ready to awaken from this dream, and from innumerable other childish, frivolous, foolish dreams like this, ready to set aside, finally, the idea that, in place of the monstrosities of facts snarling at me, I should tame marionettes created by my imagination, and ready to deprive myself of the joy that perpetually overcomes me if I think of the unknown of earthly regions that I imagine as being far too risky. I shall bear the knowledge, I said, that the reason I shall not find what I am seeking is not because it does not exist, but because I am too blind, till the end of time, to find it; I can accept that, I quickened my steps a bit, the tasks are simpler, the motives are more transparent and the presumed secrets in them less interesting than we would suppose; but, first and foremost, I am resigned to having to bow to the order of the world that has now been illuminated to me, to the unmerciful order glimpsed from the balcony, which precisely today, on the evening of my arrival in Beijing, saw the hour had come to make me understand that I shall never understand, and if I do not content myself with wisely being satisfied with musing about the inaccessible, magical structure, then my exclusion will be definitively sealed, and I shall be condemned not only to this distance that is insurmountable by reason, but also to immutable stupidity.

Because that's what this is about, exclusion, I acknowledged, and however incredible it may seem, as a slave to that bad habit of mine, admitted to at most once a year, of first setting on fire before looking to see what is burning, only then did I become capable of this; it was really only at this juncture of events that I finally calmed down, after the *very ticklish* outline of the perhaps still remembered *very deep* questions, and following the foregoing rousing declaration of the Incomprehensible, when—approaching the guard at the gate who had been detailed to protect the ambassadorial residences—it was not possible to put off confronting what had really happened to me when, having washed off the dust of the Gobi, I stepped out—for purposes of beginning my Beijing story, which, as I have already tried several times to commit to memory, did not begin—into the fateful air of the balcony.

I could already see, on the right of the open entranceway, the Chinese guard, wavering between ceremonially stiff attention and sly relaxation of the leg muscles, with the rifle barrel poking up above his shoulder, and at the same



time I was also able to see my previous self up above, and I concluded that the whole thing had begun with me peeking out through the glass of the door that let onto the balcony, and something (perhaps the gently swaying boughs of the plane-trees in the gigantic courtyard) reminded me how refreshingly clean, and pleasantly cool it must be outside, as compared with the stuffiness of the long closed apartment; whereupon I opened the door and, with the towel still draped round my neck, after some hesitation, went out right to the rail and, with arms and hands extended, propped myself on it, leaning slightly backwards rather than forwards, closed my eyes, took a deep sniff of the coolness, then really did look up at the star-strewn autumnal sky over Beijing, and at that moment I realised with amazement that this was the first time in years that I was looking up at the sky, the first time in years that I was looking up at all. More than likely, besides me, there were several million Chinese whose eyes were dazzled by the spectacle that evening (several million pairs of Chinese eyes, with tiny specks of light glinting on the curved mirror of their pupils: they too, seen from higher up, are as many earthly stars down below, around me, but let's drop this), for this sky, then, with its golden spray on the mysterious velvet of a darker shade of blue, glittered in a frankly exaggerated parade of exceptional beauty. It may have been, therefore, that I was not the only one who saw and admired all this, but for certain there was no fellow being who would have seen the same thing as I did, because even if I did look at it, and it did indeed attract me; if I admired it, and I did indeed float towards it, I suddenly became aware not only that I was separated from it by a vast distance but also that this distance seemed as if it had been frozen in ice, or it was a crystalline path, and I was cut off from the place to which that path would lead, excluded from it and deprived of it, perhaps definitively, that is what I suddenly became aware of, at one fell swoop, when, with the towel still draped round my neck, propped up by the rail, having taken a deep breath I looked up at the sky. I didn't need time to understand, it flashed into me at immeasurable speed, and I knew exactly how instantaneous, how radical a change this was in my life: a change, though not of a person who is thereby lifted among big things, but one who is exiled from there forever; in other words, a change that doesn't remind one of disappointments by imparting the bitterness of being deprived of winnings, but sums one up in a single defeat, letting him know that there was never anything at stake, it wasn't even a game, imagination was at an end. However ingeniously I might cover up the sentimental simple-mindedness inherent in the matter, I have truly always supposed that I was destined for something, for some task; whether or not I would be able to work out what it was, whether I would be equal to it, if it exists, or spoil it, I personally am an important item in a remote calculation; yet now, at a stroke, I had to recognise that there was no question here of any kind of task or significance, nor would there ever be; and anyway, the sort of



thinking which, in order to avoid the facts, substitutes with the manoeuvres of deceit, the sort of life that, even in this so-called thinking, seeks only quick pleasure is inevitably condemned to failure, just as I too was condemned to failure when I let things get this far, to this Beijing evening, this balcony scene, where looking up at the sky meant seeing that I had no contact with the sky, looking up to which, in itself, now meant that, as with the age in which I am living, my link with the cosmos has ruptured, that I am cut off from the universe, excluded from it, deprived of it, maybe definitively. I looked sadly back at the military order of the vast courtyard, the mute entrances of the unadorned concrete diplomatic buildings, the symmetrically fashioned car ramps, the wide road in the middle, along which I had been walking this far, and the plane-trees on either side as they quietly whispered with their gently swaying boughs above my head; and while, all at once, out of the previous state of desertedness two cars appeared behind me then, flashing their international plates ("F" and "B"), tore past me toward the gate, I thought back with the same sadness to that other, unmercifully long road on which, through the billowing generalities, this fact of the rupturing of the link with the cosmos had finally assumed within me a clear form that it was easy to round out and give the finishing touches to, namely, to add that I am not simply cut off from the universe, not simply excluded from it and deprived of it, but all alone I am the one to whom all this is due, since by, as it were, unconsciously submitting to the lack of this celestial link, and not realising how lamentable is the age which is not in contact with the sky, I had excluded myself, deprived myself of my own celestial connections; and now it was in vain that it had started to be very painful, it was too late, in vain would I very much like to undo it; it was at this point that I reached the gate at last, there was no going back on it now.

The guard was very young; the rifle that was resting against the pit of his shoulder did not so much as quiver in his white-gloved hand; stiffly, with a motionless, forward-jutting chin, and on his own small wooden podium, he noted with, all things considered, a rather alarmed and irate expression on his face that, insofar as I could manage it in this sorrow, I nodded amiably across to him and even said "*Zái jiàn!*", "Good-bye!", twice over at that, when I stepped over the ditch, which, disguised as a rainwater gutter but in reality serving to slow down cars, ran in front of the cabin for the invisible guard, then passing by the cabin I came through the gate and, turning right, set off toward the denser traffic on Gongrentiyu Chang Bei Lu. And in this involuntary nod with which I managed unintentionally to fluster the lad, who had been ordered to stand at steady attention as an impersonal soldier of Order, in this rural mode of address, in what obviously from my mouth must have been a hilariously sounding "*Zái jiàn*", there was—oddly enough, given that I had been cleaned out—a sense of release, the sensation that when, having marched the length of the huge tree-lined walk that winds between the



ambassadorial residential quarters and passed by the invisible guard in his cabin and the lad on sentry duty who had been flustered by my greeting, I stepped out of the gate, then I not only stepped out of the gate, not only stepped out of the head-spinning hubbub of the inner courtyard into the peace of Gongrentiyu Chang, but I also stepped out of my state of torment into forbearance, and also out of the jumble of illusions and deceits into bitter lucidities; in short, out of complexity into simplicity, and in relief at there being nothing to work out, because everything has already been worked out, and nothing to research further, because the explanation for everything is here, and nothing to worry about any longer as to what I, along with my age, might be destined for, because just now, on the road to the gate, it turned out that both I and my entire age have been omitted, so to speak, from the descriptions of the past given by the inhabitants of the boundless spaciousness seen from the balcony, and from their plans for the future.

I did not look up, even by way of farewell, at the starry sky above me, and while we are at it, let me add, for a laugh, that I did not, as I recall, take much notice of the moral code within me either when I stopped for a minute on the sidewalk, pulled out from my jacket side-pocket my hip flask, which I had filled with cheap whiskey purchased in the duty-free store at Moscow airport, and, placing my trust in rapid inebriation, took a swig in order to set off in that certain direction toward the denser traffic of Gongren. It all seemed clear, and all simple: the whiskey was good, indeed very good, while the people who side-stepped round me on the sidewalk when I stopped to take a swig of whiskey were placid and patient, and maybe that was precisely the reason, indeed it quite certainly was, this firm intention of getting inebriated by the quick route, and not at all just for a laugh, and this patience around me—the reason why, easily as I had become conscious of the Dantesque turning-point in my life (“...darkling woods...”) on the straight line of the inner courtyard that linked the balcony with the puppy-faced guard, it was just as hard to recognise the consequences of this turning-point, above all that I was excluded not only from celestial connections but, in a certain respect, from earthly ones as well; for instance, finding my way around the city’s transport system. But no, not merely on account of the inebriation and patience, not just because of these, since there was a cool cleanness in the air, the fragrance of a vegetation just breathing freely again after having been choked by the desert dust swept here from the Gobi, which mingled with the evening fragrance of festively flower-bedecked boulevards and squares to reach one in enchanting waves; or the poetic emanation of security that, in the extraordinary width of the Gongren, informed the roof structure of the foliage overarching the lanes of cars, the double sea of bicycles and pedestrians, separately for cars, separately for the double sea of bicycles, and separately for pedestrians, or beside me in this sea of bicycles, the first rickshaw I came across, which, with its forward-stooping



driver and loose, sagging chain underneath, immediately opened up for me paths into the past; or the first dragon, parading in red, yellow, green and blue lighted neon tubes on a showy restaurant façade, or the people themselves, the Beijingers, most of them still wearing those steel-grey Mao suits and flat cloth shoes, as they all stream in roughly the same direction as me (I soon had the feeling: all ten million at once...) "towards the denser traffic"—and I could carry on and on with the innumerable phenomena, each of which prevented me from realising that when, just before, I had stepped past the guard through the gate, then I had not been set free for Gongren but had strayed into a labyrinth out of which, I was to understand weeks later, I would never manage to get out of again.

I strayed into it, and instantly lost my way, although I was not aware in the slightest of having strayed into anything, or having lost my way in anything; indeed, as the whiskey in my hip flask dwindled I became increasingly livelier in my mild state of intoxication, and consequently my self-confidence grew as well—most of all, curiously enough, in respect to where I was. I arrived at the first junction and stopped at one of the crossings, in the crowd that was thickening at the red light and thinning at the green, in order to observe—having seen no need to inform myself beforehand about practical matters of that kind—which means of transport it would be most expedient to choose if a person like me, on his first evening in the northern capital city of yore of the Chinese empire, after having been almost annihilated by an innocently won recognition on one of the balconies of the embassy quarter, and, proceeding in a none-too-precisely specified direction, with a none-too-precisely specified aim, yet wishing to see the essence of Beijing without any detours, as directly as possible, as I put it, slightly unsteady on my feet, in the surging crowd at the crossing-place. Occasionally taking a swig from the hip flask, I stood there doggedly for several minutes, and having failed to discover a single means of mass transportation, my accomplishment could be summed up as, having managed to set my feet at the kerbside, I did not allow myself to be swept away in two directions at once—opposing ones at that—when a battered grey bus hove into sight from the left and, pitching on the bumpiness of the roadway, cut across the crossing and then, without having braked at any stop, slipped out of sight among the honking cars, in the forest of bicycles.

So: by bus! I decided most categorically from what I had seen, and I felt that all I needed to do now was to determine what bearing to take, then everything thereafter would go smoothly.

I recalled, in point of fact at just the right time, what the fellow who had driven me to my lodgings had told me, which was that our district, by which he meant his and mine—well anyway, the new diplomatic quarter, was close to the heart (or "beating heart" as he put it) of Beijing, lying a little bit, and he cracked a smile at this point, to the north-east, while the fact that this beating



heart was in the geometrical centre of the city was obvious from a cursory glance at a map during the train journey through the desert. Two supportive facts had thus already presented themselves, as a result of which deciding what bearing to take, in the end, proved child's play, for all that I registered was that if I was to the north-east of it, then I needed to take a south-westerly bearing, and that south-west was naturally over where that immense crowd of people was heading, and I had already lined up a point on the opposite side of the crossing, and had set off toward it along the sidewalk, when I spotted the green lamp on the far side. That was a rash step, and my attention was instantly drawn to how much so by three passenger cars, a goods truck and roughly three hundred cyclists coming from the left; so, grasping that a green lamp here served more as a signal of a theoretical possibility of crossing, or to put it better: a signal at which crossing is most completely free and possible, though of course only insofar as that is also corroborated by other circumstances—so, having grasped all this, I waited for the next green lamp, and as best as possible, placing my life at risk, as best I recall, four times over, I crept over to the far side, then, further on, another crossing; but on reaching the point opposite that had been determined at the start I saw no trace of a bus stop either there, where I had presumed, or, on looking back, on the part of the crossing that now lay to my left.

Yet there has to be a bus stop, I decided, and because I suspected that the only reason I could not see it was the stupefying scale of the crossing, I first set off in the direction where presumably the real end of the square was, then, when I realised, around two to three hundred metres further on, that I was now a good way clear of the square but there was going to be no stop connected with the square, I had the thought: why not walk a bit, why not tramp along further in this direction to the next boarding stop, as to go back now would be absolutely senseless, whereas by tramping on in this direction I'll get to a bus sooner or later, and finally to take a stroll and have a look around in the meantime, especially now that, instead of the hitherto so oppressive weight of that oft-mentioned turning-point in my life, all I was feeling was its sheer fact, and along with that the liberation of my light inebriation—that, I determined, would be truly pleasing. And taking a stroll really would have been pleasing; but to walk at least three kilometres, if I could rightly judge my paces, and in a growing state of disillusionment at that, was not so pleasing, to say nothing of the fact that the environs themselves became so bleak, and although it would be stretching a point to say they were deserted, for there were still plenty of cars and convoys of cyclists, but ever fewer pedestrians, indeed almost no one, I was forced to conclude, after barely more than a few hundred metres, that I was almost alone; I was plodding almost solitarily along the sidewalk beside what showed every sign of being an endless row of grey prefabricated housing blocks, and the direction, though by and large good, was as yet uncertain when it came



to the details. Yes, I walked roughly three kilometres, hoping all along that a sign to indicate a stop just had to pop up at some place by the roadside, at least three kilometres, that's for sure, when I suddenly became aware of a suspicious droning noise behind my back, from which direction what I had picked out kilometres beforehand did, indeed, soon materialise, but in vain: a battered, rattletrap bus, jam-packed with passengers. I made inquiring, bewildered signs at the invisible driver, but the only response to that was seemingly to chug past me, if anything, even more triumphantly, while I ran after it for a bit but then slowed down and finally stopped to watch as, with its route number displayed, slightly lopsidedly, flashing at me in farewell in the rear window, the No. 44 disappeared into the distance. However indignant I might have been, to put it mildly, about the absurdity of having enough space between two bus stops to accommodate, without any exaggeration, an entire city district, there was nothing I could do about it, and I consoled myself that I had at least learned the number of the bus I was hoping to catch, and there is no denying that it really was to my advantage to be clear about that, because when, after a final run of miseries, I was finally able to cling to the pole of a sign marking a bus stop, then sit down on the kerb to stretch out my blistering feet and pull out my map (the hip flask was no longer of any interest as it was empty), then, with the help of the number, I really did manage, insofar as it was possible at all in the feeble illumination that was cast that way by the street light, to discern where I must be, roughly speaking, and where the No. 44 might take me from there, roughly speaking, if it were to come by.

I even had something in the way of a plan, having examined the map, but then a bus arrived which was displaying No. 403, which instantly, there and then, foiled all plans.

I strove, by three pairs of mutually negating opposites, to find a solution to this unexpected riddle as I scrambled to my feet from the kerb.

First of all, that either this No. 403 was not on the right route, or else I was not on Chaoyangmen Beidajie, although I was quite convinced of the latter, having repeatedly seen that name written on signs as I was coming this way; second, that either it was not a No. 44 that I had seen flashing at me beforehand, on that impudently disappearing vehicle, and thus it did not run there, or it did indeed run there, but I was so drunk that it had not been a No. 44 that I had seen flashing at me beforehand; and finally third, that either the map was bad, so all further efforts were in vain as I was anyway going to get lost in Beijing, or else everything was perfectly alright: the map was good, and this was Chaoyangmenwai, and the No. 44 did go that way, except when a No. 403 strayed this way for some reason.

However it might have been, there was no time left to muse and ponder, because the bus braked, the rear door swung open, I jumped on, and in so doing I was immediately confronted with fresh difficulties, merely the starting-



point of which was that on my map the... how shall I put it... concurrence of services was not indicated, and which, within no time at all, made it clear to me that, although it may have been possible up till then to fool around with those otherwise not at all so funny blistering feet and with the sorrows of walking on one's own, from now on, I sobered up in a double sense, it was all serious.

Inside, the No. 403 looked exactly as one might have suspected from the outside: anything that had originally been screwed in place was now teetering or tottering or clattering; the loosened seats creaked, the tin roof wobbled, the glass in the windows and doors rattled furiously, whereas we, the squashed passengers, lurched and swayed as one to left and right, up and down, as we battled among ourselves for a handhold on the nearest aluminium pole, from which, if that battle was won, one could hang on beside the rear door, where I was acrobatically working my way ever further up the steps, in order to be able to plant my feet more securely on the bus's floor and not have this mass inevitably lean on me at each and every corner; in short, almost immediately beside me, in a section cordoned off by a rail, behind a tiny steel counter, I discovered the conductor, a sweet-faced young woman, looking impassively ahead, as if she were keeping her eyes on the books of tickets bouncing around on the steel counter, or the bundles of banknotes, held together with rubber bands, that were wriggling in the iron counter's little drawers, in case they somehow jumped out. Yet she was not keeping her eyes on the books of tickets, or even on the bundles of banknotes, but on me, in the same way as all the passengers standing around and pressed against me were goggling at me, the European who had unexpectedly turned up among them, who at the very first had no idea at all what he was going to do now, and above all how, although it was plain that everyone was waiting for this to become clear nonetheless. Surrounded by nothing but curious faces, nothing but eyes fixed on and marvelling at me, nothing but tenaciously interested, imperturbable looks, perhaps it was precisely this patent, almost childish tension of expectation which helped me to decide suddenly, and then—renouncing the idea of weaving into the matter any deep sadness over our exclusion from the universe—I handed over my open map to the person standing beside me and gestured at him to pass it on to the conductress, then, stretching over several heads, I jabbed a finger several times at the centre of Beijing and, smiling, merely said to her “to the Heart of the City.”

The effect was extraordinary.

As if at the wave of a magic wand, not just the conductress's being but the bus's entire atmosphere changed abruptly on hearing this “Heart of the City”: people cheered up and chuckled in relief at one another, then directed such warm, pleasant and friendly glances at me, as if I had informed each of them, individually, that in truth I sought to reach their heart for four maos, that being what the conductress took, holding up two two-mao coins, from the bag of



small change that was sent over to her, for her too to dispatch, with equally glistening eyes and affection, the two quite tiny bus tickets and, like the others, keep an eye on the remainder that was finding its way back to me via intermediary helping hands. With the arrival of the tickets and change, the map too, which, like a sort of relic of the situation, it was very noticeable that no one wanted to fold up, also approached over the heads, after which brief, but fierce, consultation ensued, which took place not just between the conductress and those immediately around her, but with a good few passengers who were standing further off also intervening, and very passionately too. After all this, to a murmur of unanimous approval from those squeezed around me, one of my neighbours, a middle-aged man with a kind of mandarin air, indeed strikingly reminiscent of Puyi, with every shade of benevolence, warm-heartedness and helpful intent in his voice, sometimes pointing with his finger at the already much-poked centre of the still open map, began explaining something, whereupon I, having finally managed to grasp at least a single word out of the flood of Chinese words that rained down on me, repeated the word, Tian'anmen, at which my neighbour's face brightened even more, if that were possible; whereupon the faces of all my neighbours brightened even more, if that were possible, and that of the sweet-faced conductress too, and that is how we lurched, and that is how we swayed along, this way and that, up and down, nodding at one another (and repeating Tian'anmen over and over again) on the steadily chugging bus on a route that was now totally unknown to me, toward a destination chosen by those around me and aimed under their wings.

## 2

It was then and there that the story not just of this excursion but of my entire time in Beijing was settled; the fact that from this first evening on—which, to leave no loose threads, ended with a fruitful inspection of Tian'anmen and an exorbitant taxi trip home—all my time in the heart of China, or rather: as much of my time as there was for this, from that evening on, was all spent in the heart of China on buses. Already the next day I acquainted myself with the Chang'an services, the No. 1 and No. 4, then on the third day, in the chaos around the Main Railway Terminus, I located the terminals for the routes with numbers in the hundreds; then later on I sampled special individual lines, such as the No. 20, which proceeded through the greyest of all districts but at one point passed roughly one hundred metres away from the most beautiful Taoist temple in northern China (that is something one can only be aware of, for it cannot be seen from the bus); in short, I bussed and bussed around, tirelessly, coming ever closer to an understanding of chance and unpredictability, the marking of stops, fares, journey times, and the methods that have been evolved



due to the difficulties of boarding; but one thing I was unable to achieve, with all this tireless bussing around, having been excluded from celestial orientation, was being able to find my way around, as a fanatic of earthly orientation, in Beijing's apparently plain-as-daylight rectangular grid system.

Yet I tried everything, with the map becoming almost inseparably attached to me, and I was most likely already a dash of local colour on several of the bus routes on Beijing's streets as I was rocked along, stooping low before low-lying bus windows intended for Chinese passengers, on the off chance that I might succeed in identifying one of the tiny street names that of course can only very rarely be deciphered from a moving vehicle; yet, commuting between the splendid sights, the somehow almost inhuman scales, of the Forbidden City and the Temple of Heaven, the lake in Behai Park and the Imperial Academy, nothing changed even after days had passed, for I was unable to visualise the city's structure, simply unable to conjure up the city as a whole before my eyes, and then navigate within it, with this whole thing there in my head, and so everything remained the way it was, with every service remaining just as unpredictable; the chance acquaintances who were addressed on the buses selected my destinations in the same way, nodding at the map dangling before them, and at all times and in all places I sensed around me their protection and their attentive presence that I should not go wrong, not get lost in Beijing's vastness, just as I had on the first evening on the No. 403 heading for Tian'anmen Square.

The fifth, the sixth and the seventh evenings came round, but my efforts proved totally futile, and even though a fresh piece of the empire's magical corners would be imprinted in my consciousness and dazzle me, I would return home worn out and with a corrosive unrest in my soul; that is to say, every single evening I would step through the gateway to the memorable ambassadorial residential quarters (noting each and every time that I had not since then seen the young guard who had been on sentry duty there on the first evening like someone who by the next day will no longer see any sense in continuing; who has resigned himself to its being useless that he is here, useless that he is *in it*, useless that he is trying from buses to gain an insight into the essence of Beijing—he will never catch sight of the order that really does bind together the Forbidden City with the Temple of Heaven, the Liulichang with the Imperial Academy, the latter with the Old Observatory, and that in turn again with the Forbidden City.

But on the morning of the eighth day I decided, nonetheless, that I was going to have a fresh go and try out the buses in the three hundreds as well.

I already knew that I would have to get to the University on the third of the so-called ring roads, but not which bus number in the three hundreds I was going to pick; so it was again chance that decided, instead of me, when, a good hour after I had set off, I found myself on a No. 332; yes, chance that decided,



in the form of an elderly female meat-patty seller to whom I showed on the map that I wanted to get to the Western Hills and who pushed me onto this service, and that pushing should be understood literally, because otherwise, without her help, I would quite certainly have been worsted in the ruthless scrum, the skirmish that developed at the bus's doors. As it was, however, I was there on one of the morning's No. 332s in a relatively good place, at the very back, pressed against the rear window, and first of all I couldn't get over it when, on descending at the terminus, I looked around and noticed that my own intention had coincided with chance, which hastened to my assistance in the form of that elderly female meat-patty seller, for there I was, standing in front of the East Gate of the Summer Palace, where I had wanted to get to; so I set off straight-away, walking among the lotus blossoms at the edge of the miraculously lovely lake, then down the famous covered gallery and back again, and finally up innumerable steps, to the highest look-out point on the four-storey pavilion known as Buddha's Fragrance, to gain a view of the enchanting landscape. Yet all the same I was unable to surrender myself completely to all that was spread before my eyes, because I was continually brooding; I could not stop my thoughts looping back, over and over again, to the question of why was it marked on my map in such a way as though this trip had taken me out of Beijing when, all along, we had chugged past houses and through residential areas; and even if that was the case, then where did the services that I discovered on the broad square in front of the East Gate go to, and which, when the time came, turned off in the opposite direction to Beijing? The matter unsettled me so greatly that on completing my stroll, perhaps needless to say, I did not board a No. 332 but a No. 302 that just happened to be about to go, which it was fairly easy to get on, maybe because it was still in the morning, maybe because wherever we were going did not attract so many visitors.

We climbed uphill all along a narrow, winding road, and we reached the destination barely thirty or forty minutes later. The bus came to a halt in the main square of a tiny hamlet, and where I was I only managed to work out later, when I set off upwards among the hamlet's miserable mud-brick cottages. At one place, because I was hungry, I bought some sort of pie, then I spotted three postcards in the filthy shop-window of the shack next to the pie-seller's, and on the back, when I inspected them, there was the same text; from this it immediately turned out that I had reached Incense Burner Peak, the spur of the Western Hills closest to Beijing, and as I went on, and the little cottages and pie-sellers were left behind, I was able to convince myself that I really was there, for I had already seen the reddening leaves on the famous Chinese varnish trees, the steep trail up to "Scare-Devils Peak", and I had heard the famous sets of small bells at the seven-storey pagoda as they tinkled away, they really did, in the wind. But the loveliest thing of all, in this poetically superb scene, was a building on the eastern slope that was already well known



from its name alone, that remarkable achievement of the Yuan era, the Azure Clouds Temple, with its white marble stupas glittering among the tree boughs. I instantly struck out towards that, and before long I entered its gate, and having marvelled at the Hall of the Coming Buddha and set foot in the courtyard of the Main Buildings, I was already wanting to set off, upward, to what I suspected was the centre of this marvellous work, the Diamond Throne Pagoda, rising in the tallest part of the Azure Clouds Temple—but at the side, from the courtyard of the Main Buildings, beside a basin, there was another entrance, and I cast a glance at the sign over it, a copy of some Hangzhou temple, as best I could make out from the inscription: so alright, I thought to myself, I'll take a look, it's surely worth that, even if it is a copy.

Right then, some people were photographing a small child before the entrance, telling the child to open its arms wide, which the child did, standing there for a while, with me watching all this fairly uncomprehendingly as I waited for them to finish; then the camera finally clicked, the child stepped away from the door, the family bowed to thank me for my patience, and after a few more courtesies I went on ahead of them through the door, this side-door of the courtyard of the Main Buildings, with the intention of casting at least a glance at the Hangzhou copy.

Never in my life had I been so utterly astounded, caught so off guard.

Inside—I instantaneously recognised what they were!—the five hundred lohans were seated closely next to one another, packed together much as we usually were outside on the buses; five hundred *lohans* behind the protective glass screens of museum displays, not budging, made of wood, gilded.

In the temple's huge inner space, under the massive, red-painted balks, an almost total darkness prevailed, especially for someone who had just entered from the outside: windows—narrow, small ones—had only been set high up in the walls, and those protective wooden grilles had been fitted *on the inside*, so that even by the time, minutes later, the eyes had adjusted to some degree to the surroundings, the only thing one could experience was that there was a permanent half-light in here, a half-light in which it was not the job of the light refracted by the grilles to illuminate the forms of the ethereally indistinct saints, but to conceal and protect them lest anything crude or sharp eat at their delicate structures.

Having got over the first astonishment, I slowly started off in the double row of display cases and allowed them to draw me on, the corridors formed by these display cases, as I myself would have been incapable of deciding where I should go; I just passed along, if not ahead, then deeper and deeper into the branching passages of these corridors, away from the indescribable, crushing, all-knowing and all-repudiating yet immeasurably gentle looks of the *lohans*; and when they came to mind, what I knew about them slipped straight out of my head, that they were in fact canonised earthly meditators who had been called together at



Kushan by King Kanishka, one hundred years after the birth of our Lord, in order to establish order in the world and to record space and time, lest Heaven and Earth exchange places, so that we might gain a mastery of our constant dread and everything should remain where it was destined to be—now, all of that slipped straight out of my head, as if what I knew about them had not the slightest significance, as the only things of any significance, I was dumbfounded from one being to the next in the ever more complex system of corridors, is what they know about me, who was standing before them, right now, and looking into these captivating faces, expressing at one and the same time forgiveness and disdain, remote sacraments and tenderness toward me. But by then it had struck me how I was constantly getting lost in these corridors, how little I was able to judge where I happened to be, and therefore why I was unable to realise where this hall's localising points were; that is, a single point to which I was able to relate myself, the exit, locating which proved as hard as it had been easy, after the first bend, to lose track in the second of the way back. I began to make repeated attempts, just in case it worked, and with some sort of image of the exit fixed in my head I set off among the *lohans* time after time, but the struggle was in vain, because by the third turn at the latest I again had no idea why I was always losing my way, whether forwards or back. I now began to be interested in what the reason might be for the temple's strange maze-like character, and I did not even look at them any longer, just went along the double rows with my head bowed; but again all to no avail, since just as soon as an image of the whole started to outline itself inside me, after a couple of steps, the image would suddenly again break up. Dusk may have been drawing in outside, but I was still going round, pursuing this image with lowered head, when all at once something struck me, something ridiculously simple, that every corridor here was, in fact, perpendicular to the next.

Every corridor *here too* is perpendicular to the next, it flashed almost painfully through my mind; here too, I realised, like the streets in Beijing, these corridors too are unfathomable in their rectangular structure. I am going around in the same maze, at this point I was coming out of the temple door, in the same space, with a meaning that is hidden to me, and I now did not seek to clamber up to the Diamond Throne but set off downhill, into the village, trudged along the little street that really was growing dark to the square, where the last bus, fortunately, was still standing; then I boarded it, and it was evident that most of those who had been out for a stroll or for the excursion had already gone, because there were even empty seats; and we descended that narrow, winding, little road to the Summer Palace, and then from there homeward with a No. 332, on the third ring road.

It was a pleasant, cheerful, warm evening, with masses of young couples strolling under the canopy on Gongrentiyu Chang Bei Lu. I meandered among them on my way to the gateway to the ambassadorial residential quarters, and

I thought bitterly that, no, it's not like in the fairytale: Earth and Heaven are not separated, only I am separated from both Earth and Heaven, from the gods, from knowledge of the ceremonies by which I might conjure them up, because I am not acquainted with a single proper gesture with which I might set off toward them, and I am not acquainted with anything; I don't know how I should address this whole sublime empire, I am dumb, absolutely dumb; and, again sad, I stepped over the car-slowing ditch before the invisible guard, and again, though I pulled up short immediately after, because there seemed to be a familiar face on the little podium next to the gate, quite powerless.

It was the young sentry, whom I had not seen since the first evening. I stepped back to convince myself that it really was him standing there, and it really was. I nodded over to him, again smiling, not even attempting a second nod, because I was thinking that it was already nice of him not to put a bullet in my brains for that much, I made to go on in.

But I was halted by something, a smile, the very last thing I had counted on. The young sentry smiled at me as at an old acquaintance: in secret, so no one should see, cheerfully and with affection. 🐉

*Translated by Tim Wilkinson*

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Virág Böröczfy

# The Unbearable Lightness of Being

The Photography of Lenke Szilágyi

Lenke Szilágyi earns her living as a much sought-after photographer of actors of stage and screen. Photography, but of a very different kind, is also what one might call her hobby. For decades now she has been uncompromising in her pursuit of an approach for which she is held to be one of the best of her generation. The *nom de plume* of 'Single Lens' that she hit upon and made use of for a while in the early 1980s, at the start of her career, defines her relationship to photography, an activity which is not some sort of privileged moment or special act, but part of her ordinary everyday. It is a way of life that is free of any playing of roles or taking up postures—simply her most important means of communication with the world. That might explain why her pictures are so hard to pigeonhole, resisting any classification based on genre, subject or photographic technique.

In producing her pictures Szilágyi does not follow any rule, and she does not do anything much in order for them to bear the signs of some distinctive style. Wherever she happens to be, that's where she starts to take pictures in whatever way she pleases, whether it is a matter of her own circle of friends or members of the Hungarian intellectual elite, of whom she has amassed a long series of brilliant portraits, or of snow-covered rooftops or the world of wild weekend parties. She will sometimes take straight photos, but at other times she will place the emphasis on certain parts or people; she may snatch moments or she may pose and construct. And these might all be with a single set of material, seemingly arbitrarily. Then again, she often tries out new strategies, drops an old one and later returns to it, and all in her own fairly self-determining manner.

The starting-point of her art is the world in which she lives, what might be called reality. What she creates out of that is her own personal reality. In one

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Virág Böröczfy,

*an art historian, is currently on the staff of the Fotografus.hu Foundation for Hungarian Photography. She is the editor of the Fotopost.hu online magazine of photographic art.*

way she documents but also creates reality, which, through strength of personality, then seems more real than the "original". At once fiction and document, maybe that is why many find it so hard to grasp what she aims at, because in point of fact it is a matter of unifying two antithetical and, in principle, mutually exclusive concepts. Indeed, there is no good term that could be applied as a general epithet to designate this creative approach. Of the definitions that critics have offered, the one that strikes me as closest to the mark is that of subjective or lyrical documentarism.

Szilágyi selects a particular frame, or some combination of motifs or elements; to put it another way, the view generates a kind of vision or apparition whereby she tries to define and document her own place in the world. What, then, the pictures that she selects are? Typically, they are of the sort of things that anyone else would probably not even notice, but if they did see them and if they considered themselves to be the self-respecting kind of photographer, they would almost certainly not choose to photograph them, or if they did, they would not show them to one and all. In general, they are totally inconsequential settings: people are seated or standing somewhere, alone or in groups, or else they are animals or views of surroundings just so, in themselves. There is nothing of interest going on; the participants are just there. In one interview Lenke Szilágyi said she was interested in moments "where time takes a rest and spreads itself out, adopts another dimension, settles."<sup>1</sup> Time passes, and in such pictures we viewers can catch a glimpse of a slice of eternity.

A majority of the images Szilágyi picks make such minimal demands that this in itself is problematic. They are out of focus; the shot was taken against the light or with backlighting; certain details, such as parts of the body that seem to be important to a finished portrait are simply cut off; a face is not visible; the picture is overexposed, and so on. These apparent "goof-ups", however, underline even more strongly the sense of real life, or the strangeness and absurdity of the world that is transmitted by the pictures. As a result, their meaning is never unambiguous but rather mysterious; every shot encompasses an entire repository of interpretations. It is as if someone were only capable of making sense of the world through pictures, and at the cost of major exertions. In her own visual diary, Lenke Szilágyi tries to look on the place where she lives, her own life, as being a liveable, a true home. She does not rebel; she views the world's disintegration with quiet melancholy.

For a long time she worked solely with the techniques of black-and-white photography, developing the pictures herself. A strong element of her pictorial poetry was the characteristically grey brilliance that was embodied in her wide-

1 ■ Éva Forrai, "Jutalomjáték, interjú Szilágyi Lenkével" [Bonus Game: an Interview with L. Sz.]. *Magyar Narancs*, 24 May, 2004.



ranging use of soot blacks emerging out of a world of soft grey tones. For choice she would show these pictures in photo albums that she herself had assembled. The three books of her work that have been published to date are *Fotóbrancs* (Photo Team) of 1994, *Látókép megállóhely* (Látókép Stopping-place) of 2000, and *Fényképmoly* (Photograph Bug), which was brought out in conjunction with a big retrospective.<sup>2</sup>

The all-engulfing orgy of images and colour of the digital age finally caught up with even the likes of Lenke Szilágyi. More recently she has been taking mainly digital photographs, which she often juggles with subsequently. This first became evident to the wider public in a show entitled "Parties" that was part of the 2006 Photo Month in Budapest. The subjects of the photographs are the leisure pursuits of the young: the intentionally manipulated gratification of their pleasures as consumers in their places of amusement, a world that parades its hypocrisies. In these photographs, over and beyond the visual treats, it is possible to sense the delirious lights, the ear-splitting music and visceral thrill, the foetal state of release in the quest for joy and a delirium of pleasures. Apart from the "spied" moments of the "party" world, her portraits show the other side of that unbridled fervour: burning out, disillusionment, the melancholy of loneliness. Possibly the most emblematic of the pictures in the series are those of cinetrip parties in swimming pools, with the boundaries of naked bodies dissolving in orgies of light, the multitude of human beings becoming one organic mass. Instead of a delirium of joy, though, one has the feeling that it is something more like the inhuman world of refugee camps that is being laid out for inspection and is treated by us with Szilágyi's quiet, resigned empathy.

The most recent colour pictures were taken on journeys, on trips into the countryside. Whether these are near at hand or more remote areas, at all events for many people they represent attractive, one might even say "idyllic" spots. We have a chance to observe the people who live there, the objects around them—maybe we manage to glimpse a bit of the sunnier side of life. Yet, however green the grass, however dazzlingly blue the blues, we always end up being by ourselves, Szilágyi quietly avers.

What links the new pictures and the old is no less than her own sensitive and seemingly innocent gaze, a touching aspect of which is Szilágyi's continued ability to marvel at the world. The look is childishly frank, drawing in the world, imbibing it, unable to get enough of it, and her pictures thereby create it anew. ■

2 ■ Retrospective exhibition of the photographs of Lenke Szilágyi, Ernst Múzeum, Budapest, 30 April–30 May, 2004.



Lenke Szilágyi: *Samara*, Russia, 1991





Lenke Szilágyi: *Concert*, 1980



Lenke Szilágyi: *A Summer Afternoon*, 2001



Lenke Szilágyi: *Train*, 1986



Lenke Szilágyi: *Sidi Barani*, Egypt, 2006

III

*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*





Lenke Szilágyi: *Irkutsk*, Russia, 2001



Lenke Szilágyi: *New Delhi*, India, 2000



Lenke Szilágyi: *Gateway*, Budapest, 2001

V

*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*





Lenke Szilágyi: *Albinos*, 2006



Lenke Szilágyi: *Couple*, 1999

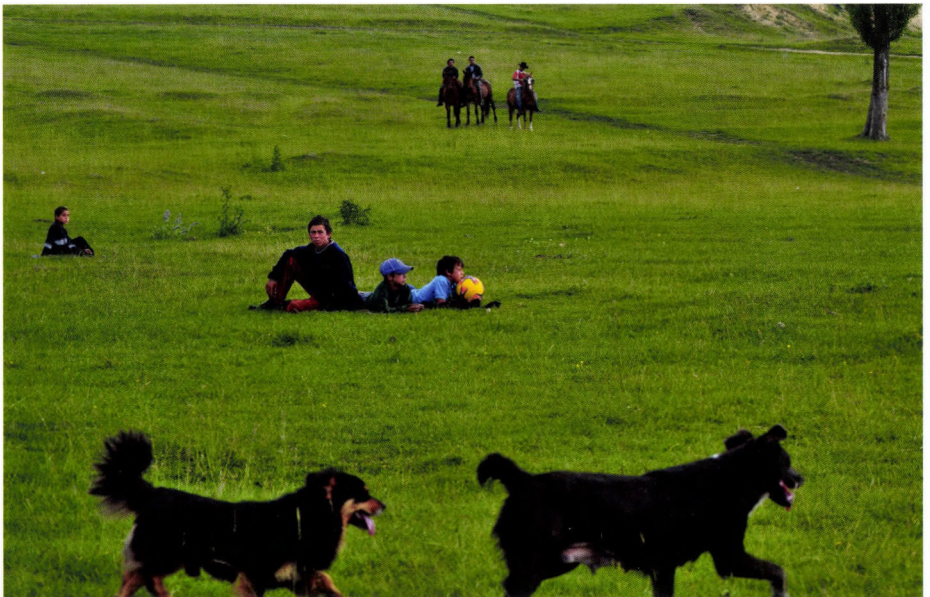


Lenke Szilágyi: *The Pyramids*, Egypt, 2003





Lenke Szilágyi: *Dragos Voda*, Romania, 2008



Lenke Szilágyi: *Sfintu Gheorghe (Sepsiszentgyörgy)*, Romania, 2008



Géza Bethlenfalvy

# The Founder of Tibetan and Buddhist Studies

Alexander Csoma de Kőrös (1784–1842)

**W**hen the Hungarian Academy of Sciences celebrated the centenary of its foundation, the Royal Society of London in its letter of congratulation singled out the names of five scholars in particular. They were Alexander (Sándor) Csoma de Kőrös, Theodore Duka, Arminius Vámbéry, Ignác Goldziher and Sir Aurel Stein—all Orientalists and all active on behalf of British imperial interests. Another token of Csoma's recognition as the founder of a new discipline was, when this issue went to press, that the Csoma Archive of the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences—a comprehensive collection of documents donated in 1885 by his first biographer, Theodore Duka—was added to the Memory of the World Register of the UNESCO.

Alexander Csoma de Kőrös was the first to introduce Western scholars to Buddhism and to Tibetan language and literature, while throwing light on many aspects of Central Asia. This knowledge came at the cost of almost superhuman effort, after huge sacrifices and under the most difficult circumstances.

He was born in 1784 in the village of Kőrös, now Csomakőrös, in Transylvania (Chiuruş in the county of Covasna, Romania), at the western foot of the East Carpathian Mountains. Then his native land, as one of the lands of the Hungarian crown, was part of the multinational Habsburg Empire. As Csoma himself wrote, the inhabitants of his native village were Székely, or Sekler, and as such Hungarians but with their own sense of identity as an ethnic group. To this day the belief has survived that they are the descendants of the Huns, the people over whom King Attila ruled. Calvinist in faith, the

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village from the late seventeenth century on had its own school and teacher, where pupils learned about the Székely worldview with an awareness of their origin, and were also taught Latin and German. The young Csoma had by then also heard Romanian being spoken by the inhabitants of the far side of the Carpathian range and mountain shepherds, thus becoming acquainted with four languages when still a boy.

That was the intellectual armoury with which Sándor Csoma arrived at the Calvinist College of Nagyenyed (Aiud), one of the best Hungarian grammar schools in Transylvania. There he was taught by well-paid teachers, many of whom had attended West European universities. Founded in 1622 by Prince Gábor Bethlen, the college enjoyed a good reputation. Students included Transylvanian Saxons from the Fundus Regius, the sons of boyars from the Transcarpathian principalities and also pupils from poor families.

Csoma acquired a broad stock of learning. It is known from a letter that he wrote to the English patrons of the college in 1825 that his favourite subjects were philology, geography and history—all subjects that were to shape his life work as a scholar.

One of his professors, Ádám Herepei, who had studied at the universities of Basle, Geneva and Marburg, taught rhetoric but also courses in Hungarian history (*historia patriae*). As a firm believer in a link between Huns and Magyars, Herepei's lessons intensified Csoma's boyhood belief in village legends about the Székely being descended from the Huns. In the years that he was studying at Nagyenyed the belief was still current that a tribe related to the Magyars survived in their original homeland in Asia. All this gave rise to Csoma's bold project—to set out on a journey of scholarly exploration to the Far East to discover that ancient homeland of the Magyars, and their kin who were still there.

Around 1800 the origin of nations had become a central issue. It was then that most of the peoples of Europe began to think seriously about their own identities and affiliations, and linguistic, historical and religious relatedness began to be considered as criteria of the "self-identity" of a given national group. Since Hungarian palpably differed from the languages spoken in the immediate neighbourhood, the origin of languages and the question of language families had become matters of particular importance. Csoma, in short, latched on to an issue that genuinely mattered, and he undertook to boost the nation's sense of identity by seeking links for a people with no relatives, trusting that he would find them amongst the descendants of the Magyar tribes that had stayed behind in Asia.

The teachers of this talented and industrious pupil sent him off on a foreign study tour. From 1816 to 1818 he was able to study at the Georgia Augusta University in Göttingen, which, though part of the German-speaking world, was at that time ruled by the King of England, also ruler of Hanover. Erudite teachers



at Göttingen instilled the spirit of the Enlightenment, sound scholarship and lofty moral principles in students. Young men from all across Europe converged here, some even from far-off America and Asia, from cultures that could not be more different.

The terms of Csoma's scholarship award obliged him to study mainly disciplines related to theology, but he also attended lectures connected to his great plan. As he was to write in an 1820 letter sent from Teheran: "since it was always a favourite occupation of mine to get to know foreign languages and study the history of nations in accordance with time, place and circumstances, here too, setting a certain great goal before me, I cultivated these most particularly."

At Göttingen, his most esteemed professor and patron, the widely read J. G. Eichhorn, gave lectures on Orientalist topics, world history and cultural history, in addition to teaching Arabic and Syrian, as well as Biblical hermeneutics. T. C. Tychsen not only cultivated Hebrew studies, Arabic and archaeology, but also Turkish, Tatar, Persian and Indian linguistics, so there is little doubt that Csoma learnt a lot from him too. A. H. L. Heeren, to take another case, was interested in universal history, including Asia and the European colonies. Csoma added English and French to the German he had studied back home, and he made a start on Italian and Spanish, while for purposes of his planned trip to the Far East he mastered Arabic and studied Turkish, both of which, he confessed, were "major factors" in his travel plan. Given that he took courses in linguistics and philology, it is not inconceivable that Csoma would have attended the lectures on natural history, anatomy, medicine and physiology given by the great naturalist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, and he must also have made good use of the library at Göttingen, with its rich stock of travel books and maps.

With two and a half years of study at Göttingen completed, Csoma returned to Transylvania (1819), though not without availing himself of an opportunity to visit the Banat and Zagreb in southern Hungary to learn Cyrillic script and Serbo-Croat. Thus it was that he was fluent "in thirteen living and dead languages" by the time he set out on his travels in the East in November 1819, for which he received not a penny of state support.<sup>1</sup>

He set out on the road to discover the ancient homeland of the Magyars on his own, on foot, carrying a walking stick, a haversack, and a small amount of savings. He was not able to head straight for the region where he suspected that the Huns and Magyars, or "Yugars" (Uighurs), had been located (somewhere east of the Urals, in the Russo-Siberian steppes, west of the Great Wall of China and north of Tibet, possibly the areas inhabited by Turkic and Mongolian tribes), because, being a Székely and thus under obligation to serve in the armed forces, he could not obtain a passport, and it was impossible to

<sup>1</sup> ■ The author has used the results of researches by Prof. Elek Csetri (Cluj-Kolozsvár) on Csoma's life till 1819, for which he expresses his sincere thanks.



travel anywhere in the Russian empire without one. He had also heard about the epidemics that plagued the Ottoman empire. He therefore headed south, making a huge detour through Persia, and its capital Teheran in particular (there he was given some assistance by Captain Henry Willock, then in charge of the British Mission), and carrying on to Bukhara, the main centre of the emirate of West Turkestan. Proceeding towards the caravan route across the Himalayas, along which native traders transported from Tibet the goat's "pashmina" wool that was used to make Kashmir shawls, Csoma reached the border of Tibet at Leh, the capital of Ladakh ("the land of high passes"), which was then still a nominally "independent" kingdom with a Tibetan-speaking population, east of Kashmir, today part of the north-western tip of India. At the time he arrived there, Csoma was unaware that Tibet was a "closed territory", with only Tibetans and Kashmiris being permitted to travel on the trade route running north-east through Tibet to China, but he came to realise soon enough that this meant it was impassable for him. He turned back in order to seek another route.

He retraced his steps for several days towards Kashmir, and on 16th July 1821 two men who had both covered a long distance met on the bank of the River Dras, in a Himalayan valley at an altitude of over 3,000 metres. One was the Székely student Alexander Csoma de Kőrös, who was crossing this remote part of the world carrying no more than a haversack, while the other was a wealthy and influential veterinary surgeon, William Moorcroft, an Englishman, who at this point in time was the superintendent of the stud of the East India Company near Calcutta. This chance encounter was to have an unforeseeable and decisive significance for both men. Csoma, on Moorcroft's advice, was to switch to Tibetan studies which were to make him world-famous, whereas Moorcroft, for his part, was strengthened in his hope that Europeans could penetrate Afghanistan. After all, this solitary, penniless wanderer, with no imperial backing or experienced escorts, no caravan loaded with goods and no money, had negotiated, without a scratch, precisely the route from Bukhara via Kabul to Lahore that for years now he himself had dreamed of making. The bottom line was that Moorcroft's official duties included finding a way of providing remounts, if possible overland, instead of having them shipped, for the lengthy sea voyage was a greater burden for horses than for men. The legendary herds of Arab thoroughbreds were bred around Bukhara, but the only way of reaching there, since use of the caravan routes over the Himalayas was impossible, was to cross Afghanistan, which then, as now, was a fearsome prospect. (Moorcroft also had no small interest in the special breed of pashmina goats, indigenous to the high altitudes of the Himalayas.)

It is hard to imagine how the conversation went, but Moorcroft must have quickly realised that he was faced with a strange and exceptional person



familiar with many languages. That someone had gone on a hunt for the "ancient Magyars" and "Huns", and, to resolve a curious puzzle like that, had crossed such difficult and hazardous terrain on foot must have intrigued even a well-travelled British government agent. As he put it in his report about the odd newcomer, Alexander Csoma de Kőrös had come to that part of the world "for the development of some obscure points of Asiatic and of European history." It must have seemed likely, therefore, that Csoma had been sent by someone, and that could only mean the Tsar of Russia, i.e., that he was on a reconnaissance mission—all the more likely when it turned out that he spoke Russian (at the request of the British vet, Csoma was later to translate into Latin a diplomatic dispatch in Russian and Persian that Moorcroft had managed to finagle and which had been sent from the Tsar's emissaries by the Russian court to a Sikh ruler in India who still opposed the British).

Moorcroft also had a genuine, wide-ranging interest in learning, and liked the people of the Himalayas, making extensive ethnographic descriptions about their way of life and culture that even today yield information. He had even made an attempt to learn Tibetan using the *Alphabetum Tibetanum*, an enormous but horribly mangled miscellany in Latin, and not surprisingly he had come to grief. Moorcroft was well aware, though, that if Ladakh and the Himalayan region were going to be opened up to British trade and the textile industry, to say nothing of British strategic interests, there was a great need for knowledge of the Tibetan language. Gaining intelligence on Tibet (lying as it did at the junction of three empires: China, Russia and the future British India) to decide its eventual subjugation by one of the three was a fierce but covert struggle. It was part of what was called "the Great Game", which ran right through the nineteenth century. Moorcroft was probably also well aware of the treasures in the libraries of Buddhist monasteries, which in view of the rudimentary state of knowledge at the time were essentially impenetrable to Europeans, while it was obvious that scholars needed to get to grips with Buddhism, which had such a powerful influence over much of Asia.

Csoma, for his part, had just seen closed before him his imagined route through Tibet towards Central Asia and the ancient settlements of the Huns, and what little money he had was almost exhausted. Moorcroft therefore had little difficulty in persuading Csoma to work at compiling for him a grammar of the Tibetan language and a Tibetan-English dictionary. He was in a position to advance Csoma, from his own pocket, the small (though for Csoma considerable) sum of 300 rupees, he presented him his copy of the *Alphabetum Tibetanum*, and presumably talked to him about the collections of books and manuscripts that were as yet incomprehensible to European scholars but might contain a body of historical and geographical information that would assist Csoma in accomplishing his own goals.



## Eight years in the Himalayas

There was, in fact, more than one good reason for Csoma to undertake the task, above all because he too wanted to pass through Tibet to reach his destination. Also, he must have known that the monasteries there possessed an incredible wealth of documents, and he had some hope that an acquaintance with them would be an important source of clues about the history of Central Asia and, maybe, the Huns. From his studies in Göttingen, he would have known that the Tibetan language and Buddhism were puzzles to Western scholars, and he was now in a position to take on this exciting and difficult challenge; by opening the gates leading into such an enclosed world he would surely be recognised by his teachers back home. And among Moorcroft's companions Csoma had found a person (Abdul Latif) who knew both Persian and Tibetan, so he could take his first lessons in Tibetan from him.

Thus Csoma and Moorcroft together turned back to Leh, which is where Csoma made a start on his Tibetan studies before being passed on to Sangye Phuntsog, the master of a monastery in the village of Zangla in the Zaskar valley. There, and later at the monastery in the village of Kanum in the valley of the river Suttlej, he spent altogether eight years of hard work researching and writing the two books that he had been commissioned.

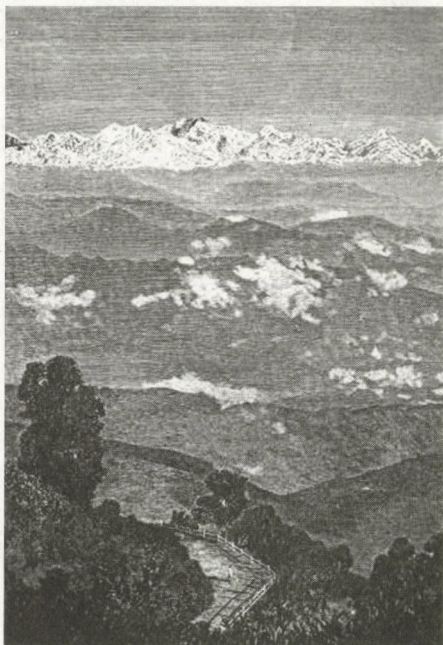
Moorcroft too set off to fulfil his own destiny, but somewhere along the route marked by the names of Kunduz, Kabul and Bukhara, through which Csoma had journeyed on foot, unscathed, on his way to Kashmir and Ladakh, Moorcroft vanished, along with practically his entire escort, with its caravan and goods. He managed to reach Bukhara alright, but after spending several months there and even purchasing horses, on his way back he came down with a fever and died in August 1825 (although a French source suggests that he lived another twelve years in Lhasa before being poisoned on his way back to India in 1838).

Csoma, at any rate, took leave of Moorcroft in Srinagar, the Kashmiri capital, in May 1823, and, making his way back through Leh, went on to Zangla, where he made a start on a serious study of Tibetan. Next year, with the two books nowhere near ready, he came down from the mountains to travel to Subathu, the East India Company's nearest frontier station, which was close to the most practical route from Ladakh into India, in late November 1824. Here, he met Captain C. P. Kennedy, the commanding officer of the local garrison, and handed him the letter of introduction written by Moorcroft. Although Kennedy was later to be of considerable assistance, at that point he suspected Csoma might be a spy, so he asked him not to leave the settlement and to write a detailed report about himself, his career, and all the places he had been. That report is fortunately still preserved in the archives of the East India Company and is the chief extant primary source of information about Csoma.



Csoma's biographers, and the wider public in their wake, have tended to portray the years that he spent in the Himalayas as a period of unmitigated suffering, a hermit's life in solitude, and huddling in unheated huts. In reality, however, the Ladakhi Tibetans are extremely friendly and willing to do whatever they can to assist one another and any "guests" who happen to come by. It is easy, in other words, for a foreigner to feel "at home". Since Csoma's instructor, Sangye Phuntsog, was moreover related, through his wife, to the royal family that ruled over five villages in the Zanskar valley, there is little doubt that he would have received all necessary help and, clearly, would have been well supplied with the simple but nutritious food that was customary in those parts. The staple food for all is tea (*sol-ja*) made with yak butter, which is mixed with toasted barley flour (*tsampa*) and flavoured with various dried fruits, pea flour, salt, and possibly honey, and given that animal breeding is a prime source of food some meat dishes are also eaten (e.g. a flour of dried meat mixed into tea). So accustomed did Csoma become to such food and drink that he later ate a similar diet even when he was living in Calcutta, with a much more varied menu to choose from.

The Himalayas are in truth an austere place, but to Csoma both the places where he lived (Zangla and Kanum), in their own way, had much to be said in their favour. Zangla is located in the lowest-lying part of the Zanskar valley, protected from biting winds, and the monastery cell in which he may have lived had a south-facing window. The "royal" family lived lower down on the slope, in a two-storey "palace". They also had a friendly place in the village at which this foreign scholar from a far-off land would no doubt have been a frequent guest as they could, in a sense, show themselves off to him. It is known that Csoma himself was passed on from one monastery to another, and so he may well have been able to come into contact with some of the most brilliant scholar-lamas, who mention in their so called "Alexander" books that they were written for "Skenda" (that is, Alexander) Beg, the nobleman from Rome Land (*Rum-yül* as Europe is called in Tibetan).



*A picture of the Himalayan ranges seen from Darjeeling. From Life and Works of Alexander Csoma de Körös by Theodore Duka (1885).*



The location of Kanum, which is where Csoma chose to do most of his work later, is far more advantageous, being set on the glorious south-facing side of a mountain high over the River Sutlej, a district where superb apricots and plums are grown and chewed dried the year round by both children and grown-ups. Here Csoma lived in one of the rooms in the highest-lying monastery, where, from the verandah, a spectacular vista opens on the Kinner-Kailas mountain range, its highest peak touching an altitude of 7000 meters, near the source not only of the Sutlej but also of the Indus and Brahmaputra rivers.

It is against this background that the work Moorcroft had commissioned was largely done. When Csoma set off for Calcutta in 1831, he was able to report that the Tibetan dictionary and grammar had been completed, and, provided they were accepted by the Asiatic Society of Bengal, the manuscripts were ready for the printer. The earlier half of Csoma's long residence in India coincided with the period when the Society's secretary was a man by the name of Horace H. Wilson. Up until the end of 1832, therefore, all of Csoma's dealings with the Society were effectively through Wilson. And this is where it is necessary to slightly modify an interpretation that was given by Theodore (Tivadar) Duka (1825–1908) in his biography (1885) and which has largely shaped the views of subsequent biographers. Csoma wrote some distinctly peeved letters to the Society, and he rejected or failed to draw support and payments that the Society had offered. In most cases this has been attributed to Csoma's prickliness or oversensitivity, but if the circumstances, and Wilson's role in particular, are examined more closely, it is clear that Csoma had every reason to fear that his work was not appreciated.

For subsequent biographers it made a nice story to present Csoma as a heroic figure who single-handedly created the discipline of Tibetology out of thin air, but the truth is rather that he joined in a process of Tibetan studies that had started earlier. Still, Csoma's researches were truly ground-breaking, and, most importantly, he assembled the results in definitive works that met the highest standards of scholarship of the time.



*The only authentic portrait of Csoma de Kőrös drawn in 1840 in Calcutta by August Schöfft and first printed in 1845–6 as a lithograph illustrating an oration by Baron József Eötvös published in *Arcképek és programok. Beszéddek* (Portraits and Programmes. Speeches).*



## The Dictionary and the Grammar

Rivalry to gain a knowledge of Tibet and the Tibetan language had begun a good two centuries before Csoma's time. The initial phase is associated with the missionary activities of the Jesuits and the Capuchins. The Jesuits were operating in South Tibet (Guge) as far back as 1624–1635, but the Propaganda Fides congregation of the papal curia, which controlled the spreading of the faith, decided to give that job based in Lhasa from 1703 to the Capuchins, not knowing that some Jesuits were also heading towards the same place. As a result, when the Capuchin Father Francesco Horatio della Penna di Billi arrived in Lhasa in 1716 he found that a Jesuit missionary, H. Desideri, had already spent some six years in the Tibetan capital. The area was finally handed over to the Capuchins, who operated there until 1745. They translated various biblical texts into Tibetan and certain Tibetan works into Italian or Latin, putting together a dictionary and a grammar. Based on materials dealing with the Tibetan language, literature and local customs that had been sent back to Rome by missionaries who were on the spot, the Augustinian Father Antonio Agostino Giorgi compiled and published in Rome in 1762 the *Alphabetum Tibetanum missionum apostolicarum commodo editum*. The Capuchin Fr. Horatio della Penna spent altogether twenty years in Tibet and compiled a Tibetan–Italian dictionary, which was deposited in Patna in 1745, after they had to leave Tibet.

In Csoma's days, a Baptist Mission that was established in the small town of Serampore (a few miles from Calcutta and under Danish sovereignty as the East India Company did not allow missionary activity in territories under its control) was occupied with translations of the Bible into local languages. In 1816, shortly after the East India Company's brief wars of 1814 with the Gurkhas of Nepal, a British captain in Patna came across the manuscripts of Horatio della Penna's Tibetan–Italian and Italian–Tibetan dictionary and handed them over to the missionaries at Serampore, where F. C. G. Schroeter changed the original Tibetan dictionary order and translated the Italian part into English. Schroeter, however, died in 1820 before the work was completed, and his manuscript was passed on to be edited by W. Carey and J. Marshman, who had the necessary Tibetan font made so the book could finally be printed. Despite a substantial number of errors that crept in during this process, the *Serampore Dictionary*, as it is often referred to, contains an extraordinary wealth of information, which Csoma himself drew on, even to the extent (sadly) of adopting the wrong alphabetic order and taking it with him on what turned out to be his final journey.

Outstanding work in this field was also done by some Bengali officials who worked for the East India Company, including Sadhu Purangir Gossain and Krishan Kant Bose, with two important pieces of the latter's work in particular still surviving. One of these is an essay on Bhutan which appeared in the 1825 issue of *Asiatic Researches*, the other is *A Dictionary of the Bhotanta or Boutan*



*Language* and a phrase book, the manuscripts of which (until now unpublished) are held by the Indian National Library in Calcutta. The upholder of that tradition in Csoma's days was Brian Houghton Hodgson (1800–94), who had travelled around Nepal as early as 1819–20 and from 1821–43 was the British Resident in the Nepalese capital of Kathmandu. Hodgson had learned Bengali while still at university in England and later, at Fort William College in Calcutta, which trained British officials in Asian languages and Oriental studies, gained a knowledge of Sanskrit, Bengali and Persian, rounding this off with the Nepalese acquired during his long stay in Katmandu. Hodgson, too, was a man interested in all manner of subjects: minerals, plants, birds, wild animals, ethnographic materials, local religions, languages and literature. He was able to build up good relations with the local Nepalese pundits, and what he learned from targeted conversations with them make his reports still interesting reading today.

A close friendship developed between Hodgson and Horace Wilson, and Hodgson sent back to the Asiatic Society in Calcutta as study aids many of the hundreds of books that made up the Sanskrit and Tibetan literature on Buddhism. Apart from anything else, this included two sets of the complete canon of Tibetan Buddhist writings, one of which he presented to Fort William College and which later, in 1830, passed to the library of the Asiatic Society, where it was used by Csoma himself when he prepared an annotated catalogue at Wilson's request. The other set of copies was sent to London, but many manuscripts were passed on to other societies with an interest in Tibetology and Buddhism, including Paris. With Csoma turning up, Hodgson could see that the hitherto undisputed mastery of the subjects of Buddhism and Tibet to which he had laid claim in his own papers on more than one occasion, was now, to some extent, under threat.

Thus, when Csoma, with Moorcroft's assistance, made a start on his studies of Tibetan, unknown to him he was entering a rivalry that was already well under way and which had international dimensions, with scholars in Paris and St Petersburg also hard at work on the subject. It is perhaps little wonder, then, that Moorcroft never received a response to a letter that he dispatched in April 1823 to request the Asiatic Society to send a number of books, including a Latin–Greek dictionary and Latin grammar Csoma felt were needed to produce the Tibetan dictionary and grammar. The first time Csoma appears in the handwritten records of the Society is dated 13 July 1825 and reports the outcome of his trip to Subathu. That account was published by Wilson in the *Oriental Quarterly* which was then the Society's journal. Still, he only mentions it passingly when writing about his own studies of Tibetan literature and Buddhism, whereas later the same year Wilson gave a detailed account of Hodgson's studies of the Nepalese and Tibetan languages, literature and religion to one of the Society's sessions. A comment that Csoma made in a letter to Captain Kennedy—"From Dr Wilson's letter and the *Quarterly* sent to me I observe there is nothing yet known of the Tibetan language and literature,



and they seem also to be not much interested in them"—is often treated in writings on Csoma as if this related to the *Serampore Dictionary*, whereas it concerned specifically the writings of Wilson and Hodgson, in which they had failed to report accurately even data that Csoma had supplied.

Although the Calcutta Government originally suggested that Csoma should report on his activities to the Asiatic Society, in practice he continued to address any requests he had to government officials. When Captain Kennedy in 1827 wrote to enjoin the Society to lend its support to Csoma's continued work, it was Wilson who answered advising that Mr. de Kőrös should apply to the Government as he cannot have any claim on the Society's financial reserves. That reflects Wilson's personal hostility, but also the fact that Csoma wished to avoid asking the Society for anything.

In the winter of 1830, Csoma asked Captain Kennedy to be allowed to travel to Calcutta in order to hand over and help in overseeing the publication of his nearly completed dictionary and grammar as well as a series of other works of his on the subjects of Tibetan literature and Buddhism. The government in turn again consulted the secretary of the Asiatic Society, i.e. Wilson. He was in agreement with Csoma's plan, remarking that Calcutta was the only place where he would be able to find the requisite help with the Tibetan language and literature as well as printing facilities. As far as the results that were to be expected from Csoma were concerned, he had the following to say: "As to the value of the labors (!) of Mr de Koros that will be differently estimated by different people—I do not imagine that the *Literature of Thibet* voluminous as it is offers much that will add to the stock of knowledge."

In his view individual Orientalists might find in it topics that aroused their interest, while knowledge of the language might eventually have some commercial value as currently no reliable description of this literature existed. He therefore closed his letter: "Will be under these considerations be thought advisable to incur the expense of Mr. De Koros's maintenance in Calcutta and the cost of publication—at any rate the Hungarian should clearly understand the terms on which he is to come to the Presidency."

The Chief Secretary, G. Swinton did permit Csoma to come to Calcutta, but he again placed Csoma in the Society's hands. On 6th May 1831, Wilson informed that Csoma had arrived, and before long he was making a recommendation that Csoma be set to work on producing a *catalogue raisonné* of the Tibetan books that had been sent by Hodgson from Katmandu. In all likelihood this was the complete Tibetan canon, a set of the volumes printed in Narthang that had been donated to the Society. Having already made a catalogue of the book titles back in Kanum, Csoma was now to provide detailed notes on the contents. This remained in manuscript in the Society's library, and according to the records was only partially published in the Society's periodicals, but Csoma still managed to get his *Tibetan-English Dictionary* and *Grammar of the Tibetan Language* ready for the



printer, not to speak about a *Sanskrit–Tibetan–English Dictionary* of Buddhist terms, published only posthumously, and several other, smaller publications.

Despite that, the next news of the two main works was in December 1832, when Wilson set off for England in order to take up the newly founded Boden chair of Sanskrit at the University of Oxford. He then offered the Chief Secretary that if the British Government in India were unwilling to underwrite the costs of publishing the two works, which he put at an estimated 3,000–4,000 rupees, then he, Wilson, would be pleased to take them with him to England to find a suitable publisher. (He did, indeed, take poor Moorcroft's posthumous works with him, and these only saw the light of day again when he published them in 1837, significantly abridged, with many of the interesting descriptive passages of which Moorcroft was such a master falling victim to Wilson's perception of "style".) The Chief Secretary to the Government replied that, advantageous though it might be for Wilson to arrange for the two works to be published in England, it was felt it was the right thing for the works, which had been completed with the government's support, to be published in Calcutta, where the author would be able to supervise the printing process. The Chief Secretary was willing to cover the costs, and Mr de Kőrös's stipend, and he asked Mr Wilson to hand over the manuscripts. As a marginal note, already before he went to Calcutta, Csoma had rejected the stipend offered by the Society.

From the autumn of 1832 it was James Prinsep who took over Wilson's post as secretary to the Asiatic Society. One elder brother, Henry Toby Prinsep, had already been an official with the East India Company and had served in India in various leading posts, being of assistance to Csoma on more than one occasion. The scholar Prinsep had reached India in September 1819 and initially worked at the mint in Calcutta before Wilson awakened his interest in Oriental studies. His interest in foreign languages had originally come from a desire to decipher the inscriptions on old coins. Numismatics, in turn, led to some of the key questions of India's ancient history and a realisation, sparked by his own coin collection, that the subcontinent had sustained extensive connections with the Greeks, Persians and Romans.

James Prinsep's most important scholarly achievement was finding clues on coins and on some recently discovered rocks and columns that helped decipher the ancient Brahmi script. His name is also linked to a controversy between "Orientalists" (conservatives) and "Anglicists" (radicals) within the administration. This was a dispute over whether education provided by the British for indigenous Indians should be in the local language and in accordance with local custom, or on the English pattern and in English. Prinsep sided with most scholars who had studied Indian culture and literature in backing the former approach, though the Government ended up choosing the latter.

Before Csoma set off in early 1842 on what was to prove a final attempt to cross the border into Tibet and reach Lhasa, he bequeathed all his books to







composed in Sanskrit, the literary language of the day, and many of the texts that by then existed in other tongues were also translated into Sanskrit. The "Sanskrit canon" however did not endure, as from the tenth century (AD) onwards, as a result of persistent attacks from the Persians, Arabs and Ottoman Turks, many Buddhist monasteries and academies were sacked.

Buddhism was adopted by Tibet's rulers in the eighth century AD, becoming the "state religion". This was where Buddhist saints who fled from North India were able to find refuge, taking all the scriptures with them. By a combined effort, these were then translated into Tibetan, and by the thirteenth century the whole Buddhist canon had been assembled in Tibetan. This was in two main groups: first, the 105 volumes of the *Kanjur*, divided as *Sutra* and *Tantra*, the "Buddha's word"; and the 225 volumes of commentaries by great Indian Buddhist masters that constitute the *Tenjur*. The Tibetans were zealous in collecting and translating Indian writings, with every monastery striving to keep within its walls as big a library as it was able.

All the indications are that the earliest Buddhist texts were collections that set out guides to moral conduct (*shila*), which the Buddhist canon preserves under the name of the *Vinaya Pitaka* (monastic law), both in Pali, the language of the early tradition, and Sanskrit, or under the name of *Dulva* in Tibetan. This first part of the Tibetan canon, which includes a large number of stories and legends, was outlined by Csoma in a 42-page article. The proper mode of life which it teaches was most readily illustrated by examples taken from real life. These are often highly reminiscent of the legend literature of other religions, showing the great similarity between all the world religions when it comes to the norms of moral behaviour. Early Buddhism also insisted on a resolute turning away from the world and self-interest and, equally, on a kind of unclinging love for all, or active compassion (*karuna*) for all living creatures (not only humans).

It was early Buddhism (*Theravada*), the dominant school of Buddhism throughout most of south-east Asia, out of which the "legend of the Buddha" grew that Csoma assembled in part from the *Dulva* and in part from a later text, the *Lalitavistara*. The *Dulva* was also the main source for an article that Csoma wrote about the twelve acts and the death of the Buddha, taking meticulous care to cite the precise place in the text from which he had taken each piece of information.

The second great era for Buddhism might be called the age of the philosophical schools. In the first division of the Tibetan canon, the *Kanjur*, there are three parts that deal exclusively with these subjects. In Csoma's analysis these are referred to under the titles of *Sherchin*, *Phalchen* and *Kontseg*. The *Sherchin* section is known in Sanskrit as the *Prajnya-paramita sutra*, or the discourses on the Perfection of Insight. It comprises writings mainly from around a century before and after the birth of Christ. It teaches the totally illusory nature of life in this world, a refutation cast in philosophical form.

This literature was the basis for two distinct schools that are now associated



with names of Indian masters: the *Madhyamaka* (The Middle Way), linked to Nagarjuna, who lived in the early second century AD, and *Yogacara* (i.e. the practice of yoga), which was founded by Maitreyanatha, who probably lived somewhat later. These schools also spread to China, taking on new forms and subsequently playing a large part in the emergence of chan, the major school of Chinese Buddhism, and its later Japanese tradition, zen. The Chinese word "ch'an" and Japanese "zen" derive from Sanskrit "dhyana" or Pali "jhana", meaning "trance", "absorption" or "meditation".

Csoma kept his outline of the works of the Indian masters very short, because these appeared in the second collection of the Tibetan canon, the *Tenjur*, to which he deliberately devoted only a short article.

The collection of *sutras* (Tibetan *Mdo*) that make up the the first part of the *Kanjur* also contains many works that are precursors of the philosophical schools or canonised synopses of their teachings. The *sutras* record dialogues between the historical Buddha (or a later embodiment of him) and a disciple. It is likely that early texts of this kind do, indeed, date back to the Buddha's time, since a *sutra* collection was recited, along with the *Vinaya*, at the very first council that was held in the year of the Buddha's death, and the first canon, written down in Pali in 80 BC and preserved in Sri Lanka, has a *sutra* section. All the same, there is no question that some of the *sutras* are of later origin, with the old ones being supplemented by new teachings, but their dating is quite another matter. Csoma de Kőrös devotes 75 pages to them in his outline.

Around the sixth to seventh centuries a new meditation school, Tantric Buddhism, began to make an appearance within Mahayana Buddhism, the other great school of Buddhism, based on tantric practices. Many Sanskrit works of this type were written, but the greater part of this original Buddhist tantric literature perished in India. Both the cult and many of the Sanskrit texts survived in Nepal, but only the Tibetan canon managed to preserve it in near-completeness, probably because this form of piety held a particular attraction for Tibetans. The incantatory power of the mantras, or sacred syllables, and the similarities of the divinities that were invoked to the spirits and demons of the familiar Tibetan shamanistic world made the practices of the tantric masters readily comprehensible for them. It should be noted that a popular version of the cult had already separated from more intellectual meditative paths to enlightenment in India, and this absorbed a great deal from popular magic. The Indian adepts who came to Tibet in point of fact found it easy to outdo the simple indigenous shamans even in matters of magic, and thus they quickly became the founders, high priests and "shamans" of the official religion of the Tibetan state.

A major part of Csoma's catalogue of the Tibetan canon in fact records the *Tantra* section of the *Kanjur*, which in Tibetan is known as the *Gyut*. As it states in its own preamble, this part comprises 22 volumes, which, broadly speaking,



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## On a Special Mission

It was Alexander Csoma de Kőrös who created the foundation for the contemporary studies of India and other Asian countries. He made a catalogue of the Tibetan *Kanjur*, so important for the understanding of Sanskrit literature that had been translated into Chinese and, later on, spread to Korea and Japan, to these two great countries, the economic tigers of our day. Their cultural base would only be revealed by the work of Alexander Csoma de Kőrös. A lot of effort had been put into understanding the Chinese translations, but only when Alexander Csoma de Kőrös prepared his analysis of the Tibetan *Kanjur* was it possible for Western scholarship to fully establish the translated Sanskrit text and its contents. So he became the father figure of not only Indian literature, Indian art, Indian architecture and other ancient disciplines, but also of a great part of what we can call the "Buddhist Commonwealth."

Alexander Csoma de Kőrös came to India on a special mission to find the roots of his own people. The question of identity had been important in the Indian context, because we too had an imperial regime governing us like the Hungarian people, and we were trying to rid ourselves of imperial rule. Our political struggle was also reflected in a wish to understand our cultural identity. Cultural identity became the banner of India's self-perception: that in ancient times we were not a subject people, and we influenced international learning. The awareness that we had a role to play in the emergence of human learning made India emotionally and intellectually strong.

Csoma de Kőrös gave to the Indian freedom struggle a mindscape which is still very much alive in this country. His relevance and the greatness of his work, the fundamental nature of his studies still continues to inspire contemporary India and contemporary Asia.

With a Christian background he tried to understand Buddhism. He lived in India and gave up his own country, using a Persian name, "Skandar Beg". He arrived here on foot

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cover "mysticism." They describe the various deities and divinities and provide instruction on mandalas, which are sacred circles in which the deities that are invoked can be visualized. The *Kanjur* also describes offerings and expiatory sacrifices that can be made to win favours from the deities, prayers, hymns, magic spells, etc. that may be addressed to them, but there are also works that relate to astronomy, astrology, chronology, medicine and natural philosophy. Csoma dealt in a separate article with one specific rite, the *Kalacakra* (Wheel of Time) *Tantra*, that remains popular to this day.

Csoma devoted a 32-page article to the *Tenjur*, which is actually a more voluminous commentary within the holy canon, and in fact he does little more than list the more important works of which the collection consists.

In Tibet, over time, out of a tantric religion of wandering yogins, shamans,



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by the land route. His was a multifarious approach, trying to amalgamate the best any nation could offer. A quest for the best is the magic of human excellence, which becomes a foundation for progress. Csoma was a great scholar who worked for progress and towards the understanding of several cultures and several nations. Few Europeans came to India and from among such he shines out. Hungary was a place where Indians have gone. Tagore, for example, visited Lake Balaton. Our great painter Amrita Sher-Gil, had a Hungarian background through her mother. Links established by Alexander Csoma de Kőrös have survived for a long period.

His foundation was not only the texts he catalogued but also special texts written out for him. The questions he posed to the lamas and the way they answered him differed from the classical formulations of Tibetan Buddhism, but corresponded to those used at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It was a period when tradition was very much alive and well understood, so these writings are important not only for the information they contain, but relevant for their wider context. From them we can also surmise how the Tibetans and Ladakhis might have felt in even more ancient times.

It is of living value to know how cultural dynamics move. Cultural dynamics are important in the Himalayas because the land is strange, the population is close to zero, and most villages are near a monastery. People go to the monastery to feel the warmth of life. Outside it may be freezing cold but inside there is warmth, not only of the body but also of the mind. When they recite hymns they hear several human voices and feel: "O, we are not just 40 or 50 families, and this voice has resounded over centuries". It is as if thousands of voices were reciting, and in that echo they hear the echoes of many centuries.

**Lokesh Chandra**

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siddhas and religious rebels, there evolved a system of ecclesiastic institutions that interwove every area of life and bore all the hallmarks of a state religion. A substantial proportion of the entire population (as many as 30–40 per cent of able-bodied adults in some areas) became monks or nuns, living in monasteries, which were organised according to which of the new or old schools, orders and sects they followed. Certain orders, such as the Sakyapa and later the Gelukpa, which confers the title of Dalai Lama, became large and acquired an influence throughout Tibet and beyond, whereas others, such as the Shalupa, were confined within the walls of a single monastery. Csoma himself established contact with two orders in particular, with the Drugpa Kagyü school (originating in Bhutan), and with monks of the Gelukpa school which had monasteries in Ladakh and Zanskar, too.



Over time, the conceptual system making up the sutras and the philosophical schools became highly elaborate. Terminology already mattered when the Tibetans began, from the eighth century onwards, to translate the works that they had salvaged from India. As a result, drawing on Indian precedents, various explanatory dictionaries were compiled in order that different translators working away in different monasteries, very often together with Indian masters, should use a standardised Tibetan word to designate one and the same concept. Csoma had already come across the most important Sanskrit–Tibetan dictionary of Buddhist terminology, the *Mahavyutpatti*, when he was at Phugtal, back in his early period in Zanskar. What he did was to copy out the Sanskrit and Tibetan terms in two columns leaving space for a third column in which to fit an English translation or gloss. The manuscript was finished when he was in Calcutta, and the original is still available for inspection in the Asiatic Society's library. Eventually appearing in print in three volumes as it did, a long time after Csoma's death, in 1911, 1913 and 1943, the *Sanskrit–Tibetan–English Vocabulary*, a trilingual glossary of the underlying concepts and basic terminology of Buddhism, is a good deal larger than the volumes of the Tibetan–English dictionary and the grammar for which Csoma is mainly remembered. If one takes the publications on the Buddhist sacred books as his third magnum opus, then this is the fourth.

In the winter of 1841–42, Csoma made up his mind to try again his original plan of crossing Tibet to reach Central Asia. He set off in February 1842, but before the end of March, and before he had reached the Tibetan border, he came down with a bout of malaria soon after arriving at Darjeeling. This killed him. He had made a last will and testament before setting out, and apart from the books that were part of his own ready-reference library, he bequeathed all his books, European and Tibetan, either to the Asiatic Society of Bengal or to S. C. Malan. He also stipulated that in the event of his dying he wanted to leave his valuables to the Society, so that this too would help the Society to achieve its aims. It is one of the ironies of fate that the probate court in Calcutta ruled that the letter in which Csoma set out his wishes did not meet the formal requirements of a will and, with the exception of the books, placed the estate (made up of several denominations of money and state shares) on deposit with a bank until it could be transferred to Transylvania and shared out among the legal heirs.

The Asiatic Society did, indeed, tend Csoma's memory in a fitting manner, and in the years following his death they eventually set up a monument at his grave in Darjeeling, the marble tablet of which was for a long time the Hungarian scholar's only memorial. Immediately after the burial all that was placed to mark the grave had been a simple wooden post with Csoma's name, age and date of death. The inscribed marble tablet commissioned by the Asiatic Society of Bengal could only have been placed there in 1845 as it was that February that the following text was approved:



H.J. / ALEXANDER CSOMA DE KÖRÖSI /  
A Native of Hungary, / Who, to follow out  
Phylological Researches, / Resorted to  
the East; / And after years passed under  
privations, / Such as have been seldom  
endured, / And patient labour in the cause  
of Science, / Compiled a Dictionary and  
Grammar / Of the Tibetan Language, / His  
best and real monument.

On his road to H'Lassa, / To resume his  
labours, / He died at this place, / On the  
11th April 1842, / Aged 44 years. His fellow-  
labourers, / The Asiatic Society of Bengal, /  
Inscribe this tablet to his memory.

Requiescat in Pace

Since then many more tablets  
were placed on the column marking  
the grave, and on the wall behind it.  
With the passing of time, the  
significance of the research that  
Csoma had embarked upon grew. In  
the closing years of the nineteenth  
century, Calcutta regained its place  
as one of the leading centres for

Tibetan studies, being one of the few places where the lead fonts were available with which to print the specialist literature. Csoma's memory was kept alive by Tibetologists such as Rajendralal Mitra (1822–91), the first Indian president of the Society, and Sarat Chandra Das (1849–1917), with the former being elected a member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Much was also done to perpetuate Csoma's memory by Sir Edward Denison Ross (1871–1940), the first director of the School of Oriental Studies in London and also professor of Persian in the University of London. During his earlier occupancy of the post of president of the Asiatic Society, and with the renewed interest that was being shown in Tibetan literature, Ross in the early twentieth century arranged for all of Csoma's studies to be republished by the Society's *Journal*. He also had the bulky set of manuscripts that contained Csoma's trilingual glossary of Buddhist terminology properly scrutinised and saw to their first publication.

The Asiatic Society of Bengal still flourishes. A new building went up next to the old headquarters in 1951. Membership of the Society has multiplied, and the list of publications continues to expand, but there can be few who would dispute that its most splendid era was the ten-year spell that Alexander Csoma de Körös spent in Calcutta. ❧



*A photograph of the tomb of Alexander Csoma de Körös in Darjeeling. From Life and Works of Alexander Csoma de Körös (1884). The tomb has been declared a protected monument by the Government of India.*



István Deák

## A Tale of Three Officers

Ádám Reviczky: *Wars Lost, Battles Won*. Translated from the Hungarian by Jerry Payne. Notes by Chris Sullivan, Boulder and New York: East European Monographs/Columbia University Press, 1992, 481 pp., maps and photographs. • Jenő Thassy: *Veszélyes vidék* (Dangerous Territory). Budapest: Pesti Szalon, 1997, 470 pp.; 3rd ed. Budapest: Balassi, 2006, 548 pp., photographs. An English-language edition, translated by Ann Major, is to be published soon by the Center for Hungarian Studies and Publications, Wayne, New Jersey. • Guidó Görgey: *Két Görgey* (Two Görgeys). Budapest: Helikon, 2004, 325 pp., photographs.

Opposition to Nazi rule took many forms in Hitler's Europe, and army officers, such as the authors and principal characters of the three books here reviewed, played a crucial role in almost every one of them. Trained to give and to take orders, to keep confidential information, and to handle weapons; humiliated by their country's submission to Nazi power, and worried about their professional future, individual officers led armed and unarmed resistance groups, or at least made plans for their country's independent future. Many also concerned themselves with social conditions at home and advocated reforms; some even worried about the sufferings of the country's ethnic and religious minorities. A handful went out of their way to help the most downtrodden of all, the Jews. Why so few among the European resisters and, in particular, among the officers, concerned themselves with the tragedy of the Jews is a problem that has not been sufficiently explored, and on which the books here reviewed may shed some light. Note that Imre Reviczky, whose life is described here by his son, Ádám, as well as Guidó Görgey and Jenő Thassy were career officers in the now defunct Hungarian royal army, and that all three were recognized by Yad Vashem in Jerusalem as Righteous Among the Nations. As this article will attempt to show, they were not alone in Hungary; in fact, their country's officer corps mustered, besides a large number of heels, also a respectable number of very decent human beings.

No doubt, resistance fighters had many problems to think of besides the plight of the Jews. In countries occupied and directly governed by the Germans,

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which were Poland, the Baltic countries, and the German-held Russian territories, resisters had to contend with the full power of the German occupiers, assisted by native collaborators and the country's ethnic enemies. In eastern Poland, for example, the German occupation forces successfully played up the hostility between Poles and Ukrainians, as well as the hostility of both to Jews. In countries defeated by Germany but permitted to have some kind of national administration—Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, the Czech Protectorate, Serbia and Greece—and in countries allied to Germany—Italy, Finland, Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Slovakia and Croatia—resisters had to decide whether to treat the national administration as an enemy or a potential ally in the struggle against the occupier. If they chose enmity, the resisters had to combat not only the Germans but also the army and police of the national administration. If the resisters chose co-operation, at least in certain questions, with the (German-supported) national administration, they risked being branded as traitors by other, more radical, often Communist-inspired resistance movements.

There was also the terrible dilemma of how much sacrifice to demand from the civilian population; this handicapped the politically moderate resisters much more than it did the radicals. All in all, the boundaries between collaboration and resistance were quite unclear in Hitler's Europe. Some officers, for instance, who opposed the Germans by helping Allied PoWs to flee abroad were perfectly willing to collaborate with the Germans in hunting down "Jewish Communist terrorists." Matters were never simple in the triangular situation that prevailed in most of Europe between resisters, the national government, and the out-and-out Nazi collaborators—to say nothing of the vast majority of the population who simply tried to get by.

**W**hether or not the resisters concerned themselves with the fate of their Jewish compatriots depended greatly on what they thought relations ought to be with the national administration, and also, of course, on the administration's policy toward the Jews. Practically all regimes set up by the Germans or allied to Germany were anti-Semitic, but some tried to assert national sovereignty by defying German requests for a "Final Solution of the Jewish Question." Such was the case of Bulgaria and Denmark as well as of Italy until the German takeover in September 1943 and of Hungary before the German occupation in March 1944. Conversely, some collaborationist regimes found that the best way to prevent brutal German intervention in their domestic affairs was to adopt such anti-Jewish measures as would please the Germans. For this type of policy, anti-Jewish measures taken by Marshal Philippe Pétain's France and Marshal Ion Antonescu's Romania serve as good examples. In any case, it must be remembered that, with very few exceptions, the national administrations in Hitler's Europe were not made up of



unconditionally pro-German and radically anti-Semitic elements but of conservative nationalists who had the interest of their country and their social caste in mind. The Germans themselves would rather work with such conservative military leaders as Marshal Pétain, Marshal Antonescu, Admiral Miklós Horthy of Hungary and General Nedić of Serbia than with such wild-eyed right-wing radicals as Marcel Déat in France, Ferenc Szálasi in Hungary, Ante Pavelić in Croatia, or Vidkun Quisling in Norway, none of whom could guarantee the smooth functioning of the war economy and peace and harmony among Germany's allies.

Resistance leaders knew well that, with many laudable exceptions, the public at large did not mind separation from the Jews; at least it did not noticeably oppose their isolation, despoliation and deportation. Resistance leaders were also aware of the fact that millions of non-Jewish Europeans, including many who hated the Germans, had benefitted materially from the anti-Jewish measures. In any case, Jews could make but very weak allies to the resistance: they had no political influence; they had lost their wealth; they had no weapons and were seldom prepared to go underground. Most European Jews refused to break with the historically proven practice of securing survival through hard work and loyalty to whoever was in power. Worse even, conservative nationalists within the resistance movements—and this was true of nearly all army officers—perceived the Jews as no less alien to their nation than were the Germans. Some underground fighters in Poland, for instance, who killed Germans, also killed Jews in order to cleanse the country of foreign elements. Other Poles felt that the Jews were unworthy of their support because of their meek submission to their German overlords.

In Hungary today, quite a few of those on the right side of politics argue that had Regent Horthy's regime not resisted German demands, made in 1943, to hand over the Hungarian Jews for extermination, the German army would not have invaded the country in March 19, 1944, with its fatal consequences of total mobilization for war and total defeat. In reality, the argument scarcely holds water because the main reason for the German invasion was less the presence of some 800,000 Jews in Hungary than the German fear that Hungary would suddenly secede from the war, leaving the Balkans and Central Europe exposed to Soviet and British-American attack. Still, the mere fact that such an argument is often heard illustrates the widespread belief among Hungarians that their country had sacrificed itself for the Jews—and that, therefore, it could not possibly be responsible for the death of over half a million Hungarian Jews.

Hungarian officers in the interwar years generally abhorred what they saw as the Jewish practice of capitalism, liberalism, cosmopolitanism, radicalism, anti-militarism, pacifism and modernism. Above all, they suspected Jews of being infected with, as well as spreading the virus of godless bolshevism. Yet in the eyes of the officers and the country's ruling establishment in general,



communism and the Soviet Union were the ultimate enemy. This brings us to the fatal years 1918–1920 when Hungary suffered utter military defeat, together with its German and Austrian allies, and when first a democratic and then a Soviet republic was established, mostly by left-wing ideologues of Jewish origin. While these events were taking place, the country's neighbours grabbed 70 per cent of Hungary's territory containing nearly two thirds of the country's population, which included over three million Hungarian speakers. It was easier to blame the Jews for the military collapse, the temporary Romanian occupation of Budapest, the economic breakdown and the country's truncation than it was to blame one's own social class that had engaged in and had lost the war.

Despite its persistent self-celebration, the counter-revolutionary regime that had arisen in Hungary in the fall of 1919 showed no great merits. Unlike the Hungarian Soviet Republic, it had not fought the invading armies of Hungary's neighbours; it had not even combated the Hungarian Soviet regime but had left the task to the Romanian army. The counter-revolutionary leader Admiral Miklós Horthy and his officers, who made up the bulk of the White forces, excelled only in killing innocent Jews and suspected members of the previous Red regime. Still, because Horthy and Co. were anti-Communists, they were supported both by the anti-Bolshevik Entente powers and large parts of the relatively better-off Hungarian population. During its entire existence, that is from November 1919 to October 15, 1944, Regent Horthy and his followers had to live down their unsavoury past as protégés of Hungary's French and Romanian enemies. They did so by engaging in Jew-baiting; fanatical anti-Communism and anti-liberalism; political, even racist Christian religiosity; and heightened agitation against the Trianon peace treaty of 1920 that had officially truncated Hungary. Hoping to recover at least some of its lost lands, in the 1930s Hungary moved towards an alliance system with Nazi Germany. That the peace treaty had been unfair and that the situation had to be remedied was, of course, the justified creed of all Hungarians, socialists and Communists included, but not many Hungarians understood that alliance with Nazi Germany and therefore the inevitable war were not a solution. Note that our authors and the other main characters in the three books professed similarly patriotic views; they abhorred Communism; they hated the Trianon Peace Treaty; and they rejoiced over Hungary's recovery, between 1938 and 1941, of some its lost lands as a gift from the Führer—all the while despising the brutality, vulgarity, coarseness and totalitarian ideology of the Nazis.

**I**f until the outbreak of the war, our heroes were only moderately critical of the Horthy regime, it was because, despite all its faults, it had preserved a good deal from the precious heritage of the pre-World War I liberal-conservative era: there was considerable freedom of the press; literature and the arts were



thriving; the electoral and parliamentary systems were only moderately rigged at a time when more and more Central and Eastern Europeans lived in one-party states; the courts of justice preserved a laudable degree of independence and, especially during the period 1921–1939, the national and local administrations paid due respect to the law.

The officers described in the three books became actively involved in politics, normally forbidden to military men, only after the regime had begun dismantling the constitution. Thus our heroes did not necessarily defy the ideology and legal structure of the counter-revolution; they defied the abuses committed in the name of the counter-revolution. What counts, however, is that in the period of crisis, the officers depicted in the three books opposed the Nazis, and that they, as well as some of their relatives and friends, were among Europe's foremost saviours of Jews.

Of the three men, Lt Colonel Imre Reviczky literally saved thousands of lives and ameliorated conditions for many more. The two other principal actors, first lieutenants Guidó Görgey and Jenő Thassy, were younger and, being without much influence and power, they could save at best a few dozen lives. But their autobiographies, often delightfully written, are no less inspiring.

All our main characters, it should be noted, came from the Hungarian nobility. They were not from among those whose high aristocratic titles had been gifts of the Habsburg rulers, but nevertheless bearing proud old names. The Reviczkys stemmed from northern Hungary, which today is Slovakia; their name points to a Polish connection. They were the type of middle income noble landowners who derived their power less from their possessions than from their political and administrative functions. Over the centuries, several Reviczkys served as county prefects and deputy prefects, a source of considerable power and prestige in a state where the fifty-odd noble counties often successfully defied absolute royal authority centred in Vienna.

The Görgeys, who similarly emerge from the mist of the high middle ages, originated from Saxon knights whom the Hungarian king had once called into the country. This may help to explain their willingness to serve as soldiers and officials under Habsburg rule. Like the Reviczkys, the Görgeys were not wealthy; their fame was based on the historical roles played by individual family members. The best known of all was Artúr, the brother of Guidó's great-grandfather, a career officer in the Habsburg army who in 1848, when only thirty years of age, joined the Hungarian revolution and became the much celebrated commander of Lajos Kossuth's armies. The two men differed profoundly on the purpose of the war between Austria and Russia on the one side and Hungary on the other; so when Artúr Görgey finally surrendered his forces to the tsar, Kossuth in exile called him the Judas of the nation. Alive until 1916, Artúr remained a much disputed figure, which did not prevent other family members from serving as career officers in the armies of Francis Joseph and Miklós Horthy.



Finally, there were the Thassys of whom Jenő only half-jokingly said that they descended from one of the country's ninth-century Asiatic conquerors. Be that as it may, the family traditionally owned enough land, mostly in the Kingdom of Croatia-Slavonia, to lead a comfortable existence and to have entrée to the high titled nobility. Jenő's mother, for instance, was born a countess.

**M**military service was a tradition in all three families; our three heroes were the last in the profession, although Imre Reviczky's son, Ádám, also served in the royal Hungarian forces. Of the three, the most conventional career was that of Imre Reviczky. Born in 1896, he completed his career military training in 1916 and, as a newly commissioned infantry lieutenant, was sent to the Transylvanian front to face the invading Romanian armies. By then, one of his officer brothers had been killed. In his book, Ádám follows his father's comings and goings during both World War I and World War II (as well as his own adventures as a young officer in the second war) with the thoroughness of a general staff officer. Thus the book, ably translated into English and provided with excellent notes, is in part military history, yet it also offers an insight into the precipitous ups and downs of the officers' personal situation in those years.<sup>1</sup> After Hungary's defeat in 1918, the Reviczky's modest family estate fell into Czechoslovak hands, but at least Imre was kept on army pay while other career officers were starving.

Reduced to 35,000 men (including 1,750 officers) by orders of the peace treaty, the Hungarian National Guards, the *honvéd* army could offer Imre Reviczky nothing better than the position of a teacher of physical education for country youth. Only when restrictions on the military were gradually lifted, did Imre return, in 1931, to a routine military career, which brought him to the front in 1942 during Hungary's campaign on the Nazi side against the Soviet Union. Because he was unwilling to engage in the brutal anti-partisan tactics so common to the Eastern front, he was commandeered back to the homeland and soon thereafter put in charge of a large forced labour unit.

Labour companies, although not a Hungarian specialty during World War II, were still an institution most characteristic of the Hungarian military.<sup>2</sup> They were made up of political unreliaables, as well as such suspected ethnic minorities as the Serbs, Slovaks and Romanians; mostly, however, they consisted of Jews. Well before Hungary's entry into the war in 1941, the military command engaged in long and chaotic discussions on what to do with

1 ■ Note that the English version of *Wars Lost, Battles Won* omits a few brief passages from the original text (*Vesztett háborúk, megnyert csaták*. Budapest: Magvető, 1985; 2nd edition: *Múlt és Jövő Kiadó*, 2008) where the generally quite outspoken author might have offended some still living persons.

2 ■ The best source, in English, on the Jewish labour companies in the Hungarian military during World War II is Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary*, 2nd ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, pp. 294–380.



the Jews in case of a conflict. It was indeed not an easy problem in view of the tradition of a large Jewish presence in the fighting forces. Jews had been serving as volunteers and conscripts in the Habsburg armed forces since the late eighteenth century. In the 1848 war of independence, Hungarian Jewish officers could be found on both the Austrian and the Hungarian side, but because Kossuth and friends were seen as liberal emancipators, the loyalty of most Hungarian Jews went to him. Officially emancipated in 1867 and naturally also subjected to the requirements of universal military service, tens of thousands of Jews served in the peacetime armed forces. With the vast enlargement of the active and reserve military force came the creation of the reserve officer corps, civilians in uniform who at time of war would take over the command of smaller units. What created an almost unique situation in Europe was that in the Habsburg army only educated people qualified for reserve officer school and thus for a reserve officer's commission. Now, because nearly one third of those in Austria-Hungary with a high-school graduation were Jews by religion, they came to be vastly overrepresented not only in business, industry, finances, medicine and culture but also in the reserve officer corps. In 1900, one out of five Austro-Hungarian reserve officers was a Jew by religion, whereas Jews by religion represented less than 5 per cent of the total population. Because there were proportionally more Jews in the Hungarian half of the Dual Monarchy than in the Austrian (and Galician) half, the proportion of Jewish officers in the Hungarian, the *honvéd*, was even higher; all this at a time when the Prussian army did not commission a single Jewish career or reserve officer. As if this weren't enough to agitate the always present anti-Semites, a respectable number of Jews in Austria-Hungary were choosing the army as a career and whether converts or not, several made it to general and admiral. Yet there was no more respectable and privileged occupation in the Habsburg or Dual Monarchy than that of an officer.<sup>3</sup>

World War I brought both the apogee and the fatal crisis of Jewish assimilation. No matter how many Jews died in defense of the fatherland, in 1920 the Hungarian parliament adopted Europe's first modern anti-Jewish measure by severely restricting their proportion at the universities. As a next step, Jewish officers, even converts and half-Jews, were systematically eliminated from the career officer corps, and, in 1941, Jewish reserve officers, defined by race not by religion, were officially reduced to the non-rank of auxiliary labour-service men. As the ultimate humiliation, they were forbidden to display the medals they had earned for bravery and to wear their officer's uniform.

3 ■ On Jews in the Austro-Hungarian armed services, see István Deák, *Beyond Nationalism: a Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps, 1848-1918*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 172-178 et passim, and Erwin A. Schmidl, *Juden in der k.(u.)k. Armee / Jews in the Habsburg Armed Forces*. Eisenstadt: Österreichisches Jüdisches Museum, 1989.



**D**uring World War II, Jews were called up for labour service far in excess of their proportion in the general population. In 1942, for instance, when the Hungarian 2nd army of some 200,000 men marched to the front, it was accompanied by about 50,000 Jewish forced labourers consisting, in part, of medical doctors, lawyers, businessmen, engineers, artists and writers. Their company commanders, all reserve officers, were often given direct orders to bring back as few from among the intelligentsia as possible. At home, their places were quickly filled by their Christian colleagues.

There were, of course, exceptions to the sadists and murderers among the commanders and guards of the labour companies. In any case, when the front collapsed in the winter of 1942, soldiers and labour service men perished alike in the frozen wastes of the Don region. By then, moderate politicians had prevailed on the Regent to appoint a more humane minister of defense who ordered his officers to treat labour service men no worse than ordinary soldiers. The appointment of Lt Colonel Imre Reviczky, in 1943, as commander of the X. military labour service district in Transylvania, made up of between 30,000 and 50,000 labour service men, must be seen as part of the governmental attempt to prevent a repetition of the horrors of the previous year. By then, many Hungarian leaders became convinced that the Germans were losing the war; better treatment meted out to the Jews might favourably impress the Western allies. The reader should note that the treatment of Jews in Hungary—as well as the country's subservience to Nazi Germany—did not go from bad to worse throughout the war, but rather varied enormously. Only the German occupation of Hungary in March 1944 seemed to put an end to Hungarian independence in this respect, and yet, late in the summer of 1944, there was again a remarkable improvement in the treatment of such Jews whom the Hungarians had not handed over earlier to Adolf Eichmann.

As commander of a labour service district, Reviczky accomplished wonders disciplining cruel company commanders, enforcing respect for the rules, allowing labour service men to visit their families, taking care of the sick, and harbouring Jewish refugees. Indefatigably, he occupied himself with both general problems and individual cases. Remarkably, not even the German occupation of Hungary endangered his position, which shows that some officers in the central military command protected his humanitarian activity. This brings us to the hitherto un-researched historical question of how and why the army high command changed between 1942 and 1944 from a sadistically anti-Semitic to a relatively lenient institution. While the Hungarian civilian administration sent nearly half a million Jewish women, children and old men to Auschwitz, the *honvéd* army kept at home all Jewish men between 18 and 48 (or better, all those men between 18 and 48 whom the laws treated as Jews) drafting them into the labour companies where they were housed and adequately fed. Characteristically, on 7 June 1944, the Ministry of Defence



ordered, in a secret decree, that all Jewish labour service men be treated as prisoners of war. This meant, among other things, that they could go nowhere without armed guards, the ultimate form of protection from the Hungarian gendarmes and the German SS. Nor was it uncommon to see army officers at railroad stations pulling younger Jewish men off the deportation trains, a measure that prolonged their lives at least until the Arrow Cross takeover in October. Reviczky was simply the foremost among the commanders who made sure that a maximum number of Jewish men would remain under his authority, and that they would be treated humanely.

On 23 August 1944, Romania changed sides and soon Soviet and Romanian troops were marching into Transylvania; it was at this point that Lt Colonel Reviczky changed from a generous interpreter of military rules to a strong opponent of the Hungarian war effort. He loaded with timber the trains designated to transport Hungarian youngsters to the west; he allowed labour service men of Romanian nationality to escape across the lines, and he helped thousands of Jewish labour service men to hide. He himself followed the army to the west with his entire family but was arrested near the Austrian border, in February 1945, by the Arrow Cross authorities. He escaped and made his way on foot to Budapest. By this time, his fame as a saviour of men had preceded him and he had no difficulty in being admitted to the new democratic army.

**P**hotographs show Imre Reviczky as pleasant but inconspicuous-looking and prematurely bald; not so Guidó Görgey and Jenő Thassy, both born in 1920 and thus a generation younger than he was. They were dashing, flamboyant, remarkably handsome and, as I know from personal experience, polite, elegant, and irresistibly charming. Both had officer fathers, but Thassy never knew his father who had been brutally murdered, together with Thassy's baby brother, by plundering Serbian soldiers. His mother was shot with Jenő in her womb. The lives of the two were saved by a local Jewish doctor, a fact that may have been one reason for Thassy's later taking extraordinary risks in trying to save Jews. Unfortunately, in the case of his own saviour, Thassy failed under dramatic circumstances, which he tells dramatically in his memoirs: the old doctor and his wife were deported and gassed. In dozens of other cases, Jenő was eminently successful.

Guidó Görgey was born in a cosmopolitan milieu; his aristocratic mother, of Austrian, French and Italian origin, never learned to speak perfect Hungarian; at home they used many languages, and they spent much time at the Adriatic in what seems to have been a happy and carefree atmosphere. Guidó's elder brother, who is the other Görgey in the book's title, chose a foreign-service career and his younger brother, György or Georgie was a nascent poet who, in the last year of the war, took reckless risks in expressing his hatred for the Nazis.



Jenő Thassy and Guidó Görgey attended the same Jesuit high school and then the same cadet school: Guidó did so because family tradition made it natural for him to become a soldier; Jenő because the family had lost most of its landed property in what had become Yugoslavia and military education was free for the privileged few who were permitted to attend. Later, both boys attended the military academy from which they graduated in 1942, Jenő in the motorised infantry and Guidó in the anti-aircraft artillery. Hungary was now very much at war, but neither of the two young lieutenants saw combat, in part because of chance, in part because of their valuable connections in high political and social circles. Still, in 1943, both were promoted to first lieutenant. Not really fit and an unwilling soldier, Thassy devoted his time to literature and writing while serving in a garrison. He made the acquaintance of leading intellectuals, many of them Jews; this made his drift into the tiny anti-Nazi resistance movement almost inevitable. Görgey was more of a military type, and as befits a young officer who was strikingly handsome and of an enviable social background, he at first spent most of his time and energy on entertainment and women. Yet he too quite spontaneously came to hate the Nazis and their Hungarian allies.

Following the German occupation of Hungary in March 1944, both officers found excuses for not serving; they faked illnesses, spending much time in a Budapest military hospital where some administrators and medical doctors were now hiding Jews as well as French and Allied soldiers. Guidó was to go underground: equipped with false orders and wearing his uniform, he transported his Jewish protégés in his little car from one safe house to another. One of his wards, a pretty young girl, was the same Ann Major who many decades later would voluntarily and most elegantly translate Thassy's wartime memoirs into English. Note that Thassy's complete memoirs, all printed in Hungarian, consist of four volumes, and that they are all an excellent read.<sup>4</sup>

By the summer and fall of 1944, helping Jews had become a nearly full time yet an entirely voluntary occupation for our two young officers. Remember that, by that time, the over two hundred thousand Jews in Hungary's capital and in the labour companies were the only ones left in the country. As the two officers were mostly acting together, the stories they tell are easily comparable and show that while Görgey's memoirs were written with verve, they do not aim at any particular literary merit and are eminently accurate; Thassy, on the other hand, often lets his artistic imagination run away with him; he uses the device of reproducing long conversations verbatim that he held several decades earlier and embellishes them with abandon. But then, his intention was to write true-to-

4 ■ Arranged by content chronologically, they are: *Veszélyes vidék* (1996); *Hátraarc* (1999) and *A botcsinálta amerikai* (2000). *Egyetlen otthonom* (2002) tells stories similar to those contained in the other three volumes.



life novels in which he succeeded eminently. In any case, he never claims anything fundamentally false.

My only complaint about Thassy's writing is that he, more than Görgey, was a name dropper; stories of his encounters with aristocratic relatives and famous friends, including his deep friendship with the wealthy and political astute Jewish baron Imre Biedermann, fill many pages in the book. But then it would have been difficult for him to report much on other people: aristocrats were his everyday contact.

The uncertainties and fallacies of the situation late in the summer of 1944 can be clearly seen in Görgey's adventures with Antal Szerb, Hungary's greatest literary critic and literary historian, whom he was asked to extricate from a forced labour company. Görgey was able to meet Antal Szerb, but the latter refused to leave with him, arguing that his company was under the special protection of the Regent's military cabinet, and that, in any case, he would not want to abandon his comrades. Following the Arrow Cross takeover in October, Szerb's company was marched to the Austrian-Hungarian border to dig anti-tank ditches. There he perished, as did many other famous Hungarian Jewish intellectuals. In one of his last letters, Szerb wrote to his wife about Görgey: "The Lord God's winged angel visited me and gave me back my faith in mankind." (Görgey, p. 116).<sup>5</sup>

In the last months of the war, Arrow Cross militia murdered thousands of Jews in Budapest, but the vast majority, well over a hundred thousand, survived either within Europe's last ghetto or under the tenuous protection of neutral legations in the so-called international ghetto, or being hidden by Christian friends. By then, the Arrow Cross hunted down not only Jews but also non-Jewish "shirkers and deserters"; now Görgey and Thassy, too, had to fear for their lives. But their uniform, their names, and their appearance helped, allowing the two to shift to direct resistance activity. Earlier, they met an ex-army officer who was a secret Communist; at his suggestion, Guidó, Jenő and their friend, Prince Pál Odescalchi, blew up some German trucks, adding concrete acts of sabotage to the meagre record of the Hungarian armed resistance. While there remained only a few weeks before the arrival of the Red Army, the two refused to spend much time hiding in the cellars; instead, they moved around, driven by curiosity and the willingness to help others in the besieged and increasingly ruined city.

Thassy provides some wonderful anecdotes on how he and their many upper-class friends spent the last days of old Hungary drinking champagne in the cellars as well as dining on plain rice in the tapestried splendour of the basement in the Hotel Ritz on the Danube bank, with waiters dressed in white tie and tails. (I know from personal experience that the story is true.) But then

5 ■ Antal Szerb's tragedy was told by others, some among them embellishing or complicating Görgey's role in the rescue effort; others substituting themselves in the story for the young officer.



the Russians arrived. With them ended the relative security offered by an officer's uniform and by cleverly forged documents. The Red Army soldiers stole everything in sight; raped the two men's aristocratic girlfriends, and took men and women into captivity caring not the least about anyone's real or alleged anti-Nazi activity. Görgey and Thassy survived the difficult weeks, nevertheless. They soon settled down to a changed life as officers of the new democratic police now under the command of László Sólyom, the former Communist army officer. Again, whereas Guidó fitted well into life in uniform, Jenő couldn't wait to get away from it all and in 1946 secured a passport to France where he began a different existence. The fascinating story of his further adventures fills two volumes of his memoirs, but that has no longer anything to do with our subject, which is why and how a handful of Hungarian officers decided to devote much time and energy to save the lives of Jews.

**U**nlike Thassy, Görgey did not make it abroad and although innocent of any counter-revolutionary activity, he was arrested, in 1949, by the cruel military-political police of which László Sólyom had been for a while the commander before becoming deputy chief of the general staff. He spent the next four and a half years alternately in prison, internment camp, and the infamous Communist concentration camp at Recsk. Accused of imaginary crimes, he was never tried and was released late in 1953. By then his family, including his brother István, had all fled to the West; he followed them in 1957 by escaping to Yugoslavia. Much earlier, General László Sólyom was arrested and hanged for the alleged crime of conspiring with Marshal Tito, that running dog of capitalism. Clearly, the Communist regime would not tolerate people who had shown their mettle and their independent minds under Nazi rule.

Nor could Colonel Imre Reviczky enjoy the fame and happiness he so amply deserved. Although he was not arrested, he was at first forcibly retired, then deprived of his pension: all without the slightest explanation. He spent the last years of his life shovelling coal for a state company. Although some of those he had saved and who were now living in Romania or Israel tried to keep his name alive, in Hungary none of the survivors dared or cared to help him and his impoverished family. Only after he died, in 1957, did the celebrations begin; he was promoted posthumously to brigadier general, and commemorations were held in his honour. Thassy's wonderfully colourful life ended in Croton-on-the-Hudson in 2008 but Görgey is still blessedly alive in Staten Island, New York.

Ultimately, no one—not even our three heroes—could answer the question of why they did what they did. Why did they take risks? How were they able to avoid the pressure of acting like their submissive comrades-in-arms, whether under the conservative nationalist Miklós Horthy, the fascist Ferenc Szálasi, or the Stalinist Communist Mátyás Rákosi? We can only suggest that a few specific factors facilitated their dissenting behaviour: primarily, their descent



from historic families. To be sure, other scions of great old families marched happily with the Nazis; still, aristocrats, whether in Hungary, Poland, France, Italy, or Germany passed the test of humanity and decency better than any other social group. Their familiarity with languages, other countries, and cultures as well as their widespread connections through the "international" of European nobility did help. Of Imre Reviczky and Guidó Görgey one can say little more than that they turned out to be profoundly decent and caring persons who, by showing a good example, succeeded in bringing out the best in nearly all those around them. In the case of Thassy, his relative physical weakness and great refinement in a world of rough masculinity must have played a role as did, of course, his dedication to the muses and the concomitant admiration for Jewish—and non-Jewish—creative intellectuals. But Thassy's quite formidable, rather provincial mother was no less of an outspoken hater of the Nazis than Guidó's cosmopolitan mother who, too, was recognized as Righteous Among Nations. They proved that it was perfectly possible to be decent even in the most trying circumstances, and that one's good example easily inspired others who normally would have been indifferent or hostile.

It is good to know that Hungary can claim more people of this calibre than is generally assumed. ♣

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János M. Bak

# 1939–47... and Since

A "Jewish Class" in a Budapest High School

On 8 September 1939, just a week after the first shots of the Second World War were fired, thirty-eight ten-year-old boys (myself included) entered Class I/B of the Dániel Berzsenyi Hungarian Royal Grammar School in Budapest's 5th district (Magyar Királyi Berzsenyi Dániel Gimnázium, henceforth: BDG), a humanist secondary school named after a nineteenth-century Hungarian poet. It was a historical moment, not only in the life of the youngsters, but also because this was the first *gimnázium* class in Hungary for which pupils were selected on a religious basis: a segregated Jewish class. In the wake of the Second Anti-Jewish Law (Law IV of 1939), a *numerus clausus* (limitation of enrollment) was introduced in high schools: most schools would admit at most two or three Jews to every class, "Israelites" by religion (Nürnberg racial criteria were not applied at this stage), and three Budapest boys' grammar schools started fully segregated "Jewish classes."<sup>1</sup> The I/B of BDG was such a class.

Legal restriction of the civil rights of Jews had by that time a fairly long history in Hungary. The first *numerus clausus*, at that time only in regard to higher education, was put into effect in 1920. It did not specify that the admission of Jews to universities should be limited: the purpose was clear but the language was less explicit. The law prescribed that "minorities" should take part in higher education only in proportion to their ratio in the population of the country. This measure was relaxed in 1928<sup>2</sup> but remained operative in practice, manipulated in one way

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1 ■ I do not know how many "Jewish classes" were opened in girls' grammar schools. Before WWII secondary schools in Hungary were not co-educational. It is worth noting that due to the school's location, the pupils of BDG were in earlier years as well in the majority Jews or with a Jewish background. In the year before us ca. 60 per cent of the pupils were "Israelites" by religion.

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Class I/B in Spring 1940

or another, referring to candidates' "national commitment" or similar criteria. Four later laws referred explicitly to Jews (Laws XV of 1938, IV of 1939, XV of 1941, and XV of 1942), restricting Jewish presence in the civil service, the professions, in commerce, and finally also in landholding. Until the German occupation in March 1944, however, there were many loopholes, allowing professionals and entrepreneurs alike to earn their livelihood in some semi-legal way, often tolerated by the authorities. During the war thousands of Jews were taken to labour camps first within the country, later to the Russian front, and at the end "lent" to the SS. Increasingly the criteria of who counted as Jew was racial. In the beginning, only those were regarded as Jews whose religion was registered as Israelite, whereas later evidence that two and finally three generations were non-Jewish had to be produced.

BDG was one of the best state grammar schools in Budapest. Several of its faculty members held honorary or part-time university positions as dr. habil. (advanced scholarly degree), making them eligible to teach at a university. (At least two of our teachers became well-known professors of Budapest University.)<sup>3</sup> Founded in 1858, it was located in central Budapest, in Markó

2 ■ Earlier, the number of students with a Jewish background was as high as 34 per cent in the faculties of medicine, arts and law, at a time when Jews accounted for no more than 6 per cent of the population. My father, for example, graduated from the University of Leipzig, Germany, but then, in 1929, was allowed to obtain his doctorate in Budapest.

3 ■ Tibor Kardos, a Renaissance scholar, was professor and for many years dean of the Arts Faculty of Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest; István Borzsák was professor and for a long time head of the Department of Latin at Eötvös Loránd University. László Vajthó taught at the Technical University and was a well-known editor and sponsor of both old and modern Hungarian literature. Our science professors Pál Bite and László Karádi also held positions in higher education. There could have been more. Actually, the head of BDG during our first years, János Pálffy, taught Egyptology at Budapest University.



Street, near the local and high courts (and their jail), in what was called Lipótváros (named after the Archduke Leopold of Habsburg). Part of this district (Újlipótváros, New Leopoldtown) was north of the *körút*, the ring-road, developed in the early twentieth century, an area of modern housing, inhabited largely by members of the professional middle class, many of them assimilated Jews. As an indication of this concentration of Jews, I remember that a great number, perhaps some forty per cent, of the so-called “Jewish houses” were located in this district when, in June 1944, Jews had to move from other blocks into crowded flats: one room per family in houses marked by huge yellow Stars of David.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the “International Ghetto” (houses under the protection of the foreign legations) was also located there, in the neighbourhood of St. Stephen’s Park.<sup>5</sup> Most students of BDG lived in Leopoldtown, old and new.

In the following I attempt to reconstruct, as far as possible, the fate of the thirty-six boys of Class I/B (two left before the end of the first year and we know nothing about them) during their stay at BDG and in the 62 years since their *érettségi* (baccalaureate) in 1947. This is certainly not a random sample, but it is a typical cohort of Jewish middle-class males born in 1928–9. It may therefore be of interest as a “case study” of sorts. My summary is based on the memory of those classmates whom I have been able to consult in 2007–9 personally or by correspondence, and on information available in the public domain, documents or biographical entries in encyclopaedias. Five of us live in Budapest, and I was able to contact ten others in different parts of the world. However, our “community of memory” is larger than the original class who started school in 1939, as we remember an additional few boys who joined the class in the course of the subsequent eight years for longer or shorter periods of time. In 1942, BDG was merged with a neighbouring school, the former science-oriented *Bolyai reálgimnázium*, from which four students joined the class. After the war, the class was reorganized—now, of course, not on religious or racial lines—thus we graduated in Class VIII/A or VIII/B.

According to school records, a few more pupils were formally registered in our class (or passed private exams with us) in one or another of the eight years,<sup>6</sup> but since we remember nothing about them, they do not feature here.

The response of the surviving classmates to my information gathering was very diverse. Amongst the first to respond were émigrés, but not the academics. Some of them were skeptical about the project of putting together a “virtual

4 ■ See Szabolcs Szita, “A budapesti csillagos házak (1944–45)” [The Starred Houses in Budapest, 1944–45]. *Remény*, Spring 2002. My family had to give up a four-room flat in a house declared “non-Jewish” and move into a room near the River Danube. I wasn’t too unhappy, for there were a number of young people, some friendly and pretty girls and good company there.

5 ■ Actually, presently the district is (again?) seen as a quarter of liberal Jews and was a target of right-wing groups, including a Molotov cocktail attack at a shop just a year ago. The nickname “New-Zs-land” (where “Zs” stands for “zsidó”—Jew) seems to be current for the area.

6 ■ The Annuals show twelve such names.



class reunion" on the web and suggested that I just list the "famous" (those who, in politics or otherwise, had made a name for themselves) and forget about the rest. I found it typical for the socio-cultural group that achievements in science or business counted little in their/our minds. Two or three former classmates abroad did not wish to be associated with a "Jewish" history, or simply did not want to have their names or whereabouts made publicly accessible (at that point we were planning to produce a homepage with the class list). Gradually, most others—some only after two or three letters and my insistence—supplied me with information, but a few remained who did not feel like sharing their life histories with me. As for those who died before 2007, I relied on information available in encyclopaedias and the like, but in two cases I also obtained data from their families. Finally, I circulated my data to all known classmates and most of them were pleased; a few helped me formulate this commemoration of our past. Some even got in touch with long-lost friends thanks to the list.

**O**ur memories of the eight years (or less) at BDG are, of course, a mix of typical high-school experiences and some specific ones, being young Jews in the ever-more repressive atmosphere of Horthy's (and then the Arrow Cross leader Ferenc Szálasi's) Hungary. In general, it seems that the school did not discriminate actively against the "Jewish classes" (there were four more following ours). Because of wartime shortages, the heating of the building became a problem and some classes were taught in the afternoon (secondary-school instruction usually ended at 1 or 2 p.m.), and two of the Jewish classes were moved to the less comfortable afternoon hours. This may not have been motivated by anti-Semitism, but perhaps it was. Actually, in the annuals of BDG between 1939 and 1943 the words *zsidó osztály* (Jewish class) features, if I am not mistaken, only once, when it is stated that in the second semester of 1943, National Defence was not taught to them. (By that time a good part of the pupils' fathers were serving as unarmed conscripts in forced-labour units at the Russian front, often exposed to murderous treatment by their superiors.) At some point, we were also separated from the mandatory paramilitary training as "Levente," and assigned—in a way parallel to our parents' fate—to some auxiliary tasks. Surveying the faculty assigned to these classes, there is no indication whatsoever that they would not have been taught by the best teachers.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, there were such gestures as the initiative of our class and Latin teacher Sándor Égner in 1941 or 1942 to hold a Hanukkah feast in the class instead of (or besides) the general Christmas celebrations of the school. (Dr Égner, a polyglot maverick of German background, grew up in Máramaros (Marumureș), a multi-ethnic region with a sizeable

7 ■ I do not know whether that kind of petty corruption enjoyed by some teachers who "arranged" for mothers to bring them packed lunches on set days, was special for (rich?) Jewish pupils or not, but I suspect so.





Class IV/C in 1943, with Dr Égner in the middle

orthodox Jewish population, and so he was well acquainted with Jewish holidays.<sup>8</sup>) One of my classmates went as far as to record that “BDG was an island of peace and tolerance in the midst of the storm of blood.” Surely, there were anti-Semitic teachers<sup>9</sup> (even card-carrying Nazis) and the nationalist-chauvinist rituals, mandatory in the Horthy era—public recital of revanchist poetry, prayer for our soldiers fighting a ‘defensive war’ (!) in Russia—were also imposed on us, but *grosso modo* the statement made by my classmate holds true. Someone told me that one or another of our teachers had helped pupils during the year of worst persecution.<sup>10</sup> Classmates remember fights with pupils of the non-Jewish classes, but I also remember fights with pupils of the high school across the street, which counted as a BDG tradition. How much of that was different from typical boys’ roughing it up is difficult to decide *ex post*. In the darkest months of persecution in 1944 we did not attend school. We could not after 8 April, when Jews, compelled to wear a yellow star, were subjected to a partial curfew and allowed to be on the streets only for a few hours. And, of course, in the autumn of 1944, when most Budapest Jews were confined to a walled-in ghetto or were in hiding, we could not attend classes.

As mentioned above, after the war the sixth form (for the short spring term, as the school was damaged during the siege and reopened only in March 1945)

8 ■ I understand that Dr Égner attended several family receptions a propos the *bar mitzvah* of my classmates.

9 ■ One may assume that those who were members of Admiral Horthy’s “Order of the Valiants” (*vitézi rend*), an institution founded to reward active supporters of the régime, were *ex officio* anti-Semites; and both the first head and one of our teachers over several years were proud members of it. However, this title was also granted to decorated officers of the First World War without explicit political involvement.

10 ■ Gyula Horváth, a gym teacher and instructor of the paramilitary Levente classes, allowed me to manufacture a good number of blank Levente ID cards with the stamp “Of Christian origin including four grandparents” which could be made out in any name, even with a photo. They were very helpful to many friends during police or Arrow Cross raids.



was restructured and remained thus for the last years. We sadly registered our—in comparison with the project of *Endlösung*, relatively few—losses caused by the German and Hungarian Nazi mass murder of Jews. That only (!?) three boys (maybe four) were killed during the Shoah is not surprising: the survival chances of sons of the professional upper-middle class of Budapest with ample financial resources and good connections to non-Jews were generally good. Many of us were able to procure false papers,<sup>11</sup> find Gentile friends who hid Jews, and most of us simply had good luck. (Such as an Arrow Cross thug taking a fancy at the pretty sister of a classmate. Since time ran out on him, he could not “collect his reward”). I have no precise data on the fate of my classmates in those months, but as far as I know almost all were in hiding, perhaps one or two survived in the Budapest Ghetto or in the houses under the protection of neutral states. By age, we were just at the margin of those who survived as “children” and those who were more endangered (taken to forced-labour units or the like) as “young men.” To be sure, the adults, such as our fathers’ parents and older siblings’ brothers, fared much worse. I have no precise figures, but many of them were killed either in forced-labour units or extermination camps or shot on the banks of the Danube in Budapest.

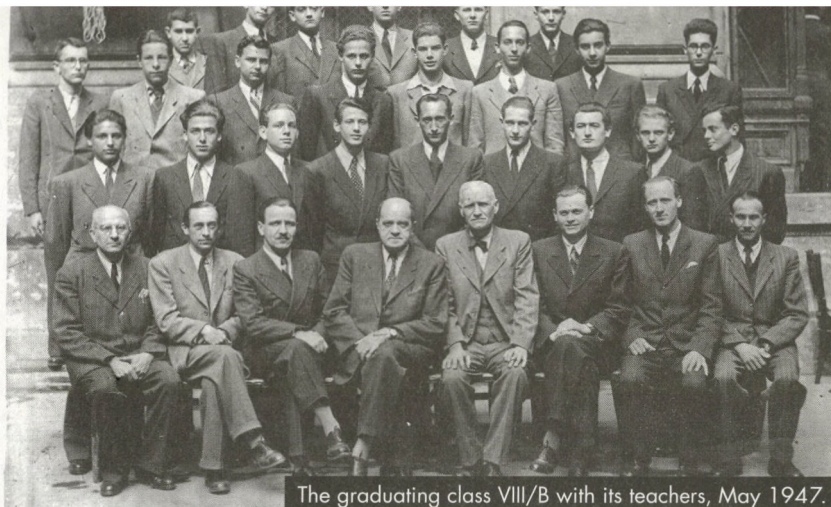
One boy was killed by a shrapnel during the allied bombardment of Budapest and one died in an accident soon after the liberation. A few classmates emigrated before the end of the eight years, so only twenty of the original thirty-six graduated together in 1947. During the two postwar years, many of us were engaged in politics and also spent quite some time attending war crimes trials (and public executions) in the court buildings near BDG.

In the sixty-odd years that passed since our graduation, Hungary went through several changes of regime, which I need not relate here. Not surprisingly, some of our classmates’ families left just before the Shoah (one, I believe, by *aliyah beth* [illegal immigration] for Palestine), or soon after the war (at least eleven, mostly to the Americas), when Communist takeover threatened the livelihood of entrepreneurs and free professionals alike. But it seems that the majority remained in Hungary and studied at universities or academies and/or did their duty as conscripts in the Hungarian People’s Army (at least five of us). During the Stalinist period, some were not allowed into higher education because of their “bourgeois origin.” Yet finally, as far as we know, almost all obtained a university degree or learnt a respectable trade.

Many of us—I have no exact data on this—supported the Communist regime at least for a time. This was, of course, typical for young Jews who

11 ■ A good method was to pretend to be refugees from Transylvania—by that time occupied by the Soviet Army and Romanian troops—and thus having lost our original documents. Once an identity card as “refugee” was issued, one could proceed to obtain other useful documents, e.g. ration cards for bread and meat.





The graduating class VIII/B with its teachers, May 1947.

expected that the Communists would be the most consistent anti-Fascists and lead the retribution for the crimes committed against Jews and other enemies of Nazism. It seemed logical that the explicitly declared enemies of the past regime, in which we were discriminated and persecuted, would be the right friends. In spite of our liberal, democratic—or Social Democratic—education, many of us embraced communism, as it seemed to offer unequivocal solutions to the complicated postwar situation. Let us not forget that in the first years it was by no means clear (to us!) that this militant movement with its romantic underground past and impressive intellectual heritage would become the instrument of ruthless repression. It took us a few years to realize that our initial expectations would be disappointed. The show trials, the inner-party purges, and the realization that the country was ruined by the Communists gradually opened the eyes of many of us.<sup>12</sup> This process was different with each person, and some of my classmates seem to have decided to stay with the “winning” party, some to the bitter end.

The next round of emigration followed the defeat of the revolution of 1956, when at least five of us left Hungary. The emigrants about whom we know live or lived all across the world: four ended up in Europe (UK, France, Spain), five in North America, five in Brazil, three in Australia. Several spent shorter times in other countries, including Israel. Because of the “unknown” category, it is not quite clear whether a slight majority or a slight minority remained in Hungary. I am the only one who returned to Budapest after the fall of communism; several emigrés visited Budapest in recent decades.

12 ■ For more on this, regarding also my personal experience, see György Litván, “Finding (and Losing?) the Right Path Together (1945–48),” in: ...*The Man of Many Devices, Who Wandered Full Many Ways... Festschrift in Honor of János M. Bak*, ed. Balázs Nagy & Marcell Sebők. Budapest: CEU Press, 1999, pp. 13–7.



A few summary statistics. According to the Yearbook of BDG for the school year 1939–40 (pp. 55–6), the profession of the parents of Class I/B were:

Factory owner	1	* I translate <i>tisztviselő</i> , “clerk,” as employee, since this category covered people from bookkeepers to senior managers alike. (My father, at that time something like vice-president of a firm, would have been included in one of these categories.)
Industrial employee*	7	
Wholesaler	4	
Retailer	3	** The catch-all category “other professionals” does not allow more than stating that a third of the pupils came from families of lawyers, medical doctors, engineers and the like. Categories like “public servant” and “army officer” (very much present in the other classes) are empty, in the wake of the “restrictions on Jews in public life.”
Commercial employee*	7	
Other professional**	13	
Retired	1	

The fate of the class (including some temporary classmates) in a few categories was, approximately, as follows. In terms of demography: six or seven died before 1947 (three or four as victims of persecution); three died young (before 1967), seven in middle age (before 1994, the last well-attended class reunion). Nine died since, eighteen are still alive, while we know nothing of six others.<sup>13</sup> A few classmates wrote to me about their families, but not enough to include anything about them into the “statistics.” As to post-secondary studies: arts and social sciences 10; economics 6; engineering 6; medicine 6; science 6; other or none 4; unknown 5. Professional life: social sciences and humanities 6; engineering 5; medical (clinical and research) 6; other sciences 5; media 2; management 9; other 2; unknown 8. (In the case of career changes, I took the one longest pursued.)

**A**s much as I was able to reconstruct the careers of the classmates, almost everyone about whom we know something had a fairly successful life. A few of us acquired a public profile. András Román (born Rechnitz), an architect, is regarded as one of the founding fathers of modern monument preservation efforts in Hungary; the rescue of the World Heritage village Hollókő, was his major project. Emil Horn, historian and museologist, set up the first historical exhibition (still under communism) on the persecution and mass murder of Hungarian Jews and Roma. Dan Danieli (born Dénes Faludi) became known as a researcher of the Holocaust and for his successful efforts in getting the merits of Captain Ocskay in rescuing a great number of Hungarian Jews acknowledged in Hungary and abroad. György Litván (who studied with us for a year) was not only a highly regarded historian,<sup>14</sup> but also famous for having been the first to openly call upon the dictator Mátyás Rákosi to resign in the spring of 1956. He endured several years of jail for this and for his role in the

13 ■ Most of these are from the category of “transient” classmates. That holds true for the “unknown” group in the other statistics as well.

14 ■ One of his major opponents in Communist times was a schoolmate of ours from the parallel (“non-Jewish”) class, for a while head of the Marxism–Leninism Department of the Ministry of Education, who denounced the Hungarian non-Marxist progressive authors (such as Oscar Jászi, whose biography was written by György Litván). Actually, he is the only person from that class whose name became known later—at least, to me.



revolution and the resistance thereafter. Fittingly, in 1989 he became the founding director of the Institute for the History of the 1956 Revolution. Márton Tardos (born Neuschloss), an economist who graduated with us, was a leading figure of the democratic opposition, theorist of transitional economics, and MP for the Free Democrats for several years. Early losses of the class were the philosopher Péter Ladányi, for all of the eight years one of the two consistently excellent students with straight As and in competition with the similarly straight-A fellow philosopher, Róbert Pártos. Both of them studied with George Lukács. Ladányi was remembered as an excellent teacher, though not a Marxist<sup>15</sup>, and both died young. Among the six classmates in medicine and related fields one developed medication for tuberculosis, another took part in interferon research; a mathematician became well known for his work on calculus. A short-time postwar classmate became a renowned engineer in Hungary, vice-president of the National Chamber of Engineers. Two classmates were active in Hungarian film and television; four are professors emeriti of universities in Hungary and abroad; six retired as senior managers of major companies. We know only of one or two failures, but maybe those who vanished from our horizon were not exactly successful either.

All in all, it seems to be true that in spite of first Nazi and then Communist discrimination and persecution of the Jewish (later also non-Jewish) middle class, the ca. fifty men of my larger sample managed to retain their social status, at home or abroad. Several of my classmates underlined that the years spent at BDG were crucial to their professional development and looked back at them with pride.<sup>16</sup> If I am not mistaken, those who had left Hungary succeeded in rising higher than their parents, while achieving public acclaim was more likely for those who stayed. An exact comparison of the profession of parents and sons is not possible on the basis of the fragmentary data I have, but I assume that it would tell much the same tale. The factory owner and the commercial (wholesale and retail) categories would be replaced by entrepreneurial and senior managerial positions and among the sons of free professionals several would have been university teachers.

Even though this was a "Jewish class" I did not inquire into the relationship of my classmates to "Jewishness" during our time at school or afterwards.

15 ■ The philosopher Mihály Vajda remembered: "In my second year at the Lenin Institute, we had to choose between 'scientific socialism' and 'philosophy.' I took, of course, the latter. And lo and behold, a young man by the name of P. L. taught us the history of philosophy, someone who understood the Greeks and who did not talk about an author unless he had read all his surviving words. He committed suicide a few years later; I know not whether it was because of the persecution he suffered after the revolution ...". (<http://epa.oszk.hu/00700/00775/00036/1372-1382.html>; accessed 1 May 2009. My translation.)

16 ■ Professor Vajthó's having made Hungarian literature appreciated by us was noted by a respondent as a lifetime gift; I may add that eight years of Latin with excellent teachers was surely a basis of my later work as medievalist.



Based on my limited impressions, I suspect that religion and Jewish culture was and has remained rather marginal for the majority. None of us remembers, for example, classmates in whose households Jewish dietary rules would have been strictly observed. No doubt all of us were made aware of the negative implication of being Jews (nothing new for any of us) when we encountered official discrimination.<sup>17</sup> If I remember correctly, during the dark years of 1942–44, several of my classmates observed Jewish customs (such as *bar mitzvah*) more seriously than they might have without the external pressure of discrimination. Religious instruction in school—mandatory until 1946—was rather formal. We were supposed to attend synagogue service every week, but nobody controlled it seriously.<sup>18</sup> For most of the six or seven years our teacher was Adolf Fisch (a.k.a. Andrew József), who was also inspector of religious teaching, but as far as we remember, his classes were more about problems of life and everyday psychology than strictly Jewish subjects.<sup>19</sup> As to our later life, I know about quite a few mixed marriages, and I have already mentioned that none of us remained in Israel (even those who had spent some time there).<sup>20</sup> I am not aware of any of my ex-classmates being an active or observant Jew (or serious practitioner of any other religion, for that matter). Such attitudes are not surprising for the Leopoldtown professional (and other) middle class of then or now.

A certain Jewish identity was enforced, by discrimination, on many of us—I think at least a dozen boys from the class—who belonged to one of the boy-scout troops expelled from the Hungarian Boy Scouts Association in 1940 as “Jews.” The No. 311 Mihály Vörösmarty and the No. 191 Miklós Toldi Boy Scout Troop were either expressly Jewish or had mostly assimilated Jewish members.<sup>21</sup> Scouting was a very important youth movement in interwar Hungary. Troops were supported by churches, schools, and even factories. (In 1933, one of the major international Jamborees was held in Gödöllő, near Budapest, and the scholar-

17 ■ In contrast to the survey by Ferenc Erős, András Kovács and Katalin Lévai: “Hogyan jöttem rá, hogy zsidó vagyok?” [How Did I Find Out That I Am Jewish?], *Medvetánc*, 1985/2–3, pp. 129–145, which found that some persons did not know this till late in age if at all, none of us would have been unaware of our official denomination, as in interwar Hungary religious instruction at school was mandatory.

18 ■ I believe it is typical that Nobel Prize laureate Imre Kertész (slightly younger than us) found it credible that the hero of his *Fatelessness*, a 14-year-old Budapest Jewish boy, heard Kaddish recited for the first time in the concentration camp.

19 ■ His postwar activity is recorded by Attila Novák in “Jewish Homes and Orphanages in Hungary after World War II” (<http://iremember.hu/text/articles/israel60novak.html>, accessed May 10, 2009). He was arrested in the infamous “Zionist trial” and released only after Stalin’s death. He finally became a maths teacher in a Budapest school. We always had the impression that he made his living teaching religious instruction only *faute de mieux*.

20 ■ I heard recently that someone’s grandchild became a religious Jew (after a visit to Hungary!) and is presently studying in a rabbinical institute in Jerusalem.

21 ■ Mihály Vörösmarty (1800–55) was a leading Hungarian poet. Toldi was a knight in the fourteenth century, made famous by an epic poem of the nineteenth-century writer János Arany. The choice of names indicates the essentially “Magyar” orientation of both troops.



politician, twice prime minister Count Pál Teleki was chief scoutmaster.<sup>22</sup>) The Vörösmarty troop was founded in 1924 by, and remained connected to, the Buda Israelite Congregation. The Toldi troop was even older, formed in 1922 when several existing troops were merged.<sup>23</sup> While the Vörösmarty was formally connected to a religious sponsor, the Toldi troop was supported by a consortium of schools and later (I believe, after being excluded from the official Scouting Association) by the Hungarian Esperanto Society, but had very few non-Jewish members. Tolerance for believers and non-believers was characteristic of both.

At the 80th anniversary of the foundation of No. 311, the speaker spelled out: "Our identity was fourfold: we were Magyars, we were Jews, Boy Scouts—and, above all, we were Vörösmarty boys and girls." We were deeply disturbed when, in 1941, we were no longer allowed to display the triangular Hungarian badge on our (then also prohibited but in parts retained) uniforms. We had been just as keen on collecting and singing Hungarian folk songs and saluting the red-white-green tricolour as any other boy scout troop in Hungary, and (as I see from Vörösmarty publications as far back as the 1930s) "Christmas hikes" were listed unproblematically besides Hanukkah celebrations. In the Vörösmarty troop, religious instruction was in principle included in the training of the boys (later also girls) but in fact was not pursued with any emphasis. Our perception of being persecuted increased and our patriotism certainly decreased when first the oldest and then all the senior scouts were called up into forced-labour units and the long-cherished tents of summer camps and other equipment were turned into clothing and equipment. Few of them returned after the war.<sup>24</sup>

However sketchy and subjective all this may be, I know of no similar inquiry into the fate of a comparable group, such as the other Jewish classes at BDG which started in 1940–43 (one of them included George Soros). To be sure, a few years of age difference made their fates in many respects different from ours.<sup>25</sup> Yet, from a cursory look at their class lists and the fragmentary information about some of them (quite a few being younger brothers of my classmates) I would venture to say that our story is fairly typical and perhaps, not uninteresting. ❧

22 ■ He was actually attacked by the far right for supporting such a "British" thing as scouting.

23 ■ Jewish Scouting in Hungary—some 12 troops with ca. 2000 boys and a few hundred girls as members—is a subject in itself. I include this paragraph only because for many of us the boy-scout troop was a much more important community than the school class. Actually, when in the late twentieth century we planned to hold class reunions, we scheduled them for dates when there was an "ex-Toldists" meeting. For that occasion more classmates were likely to travel halfway across the world.

24 ■ At a recent Vörösmarty anniversary meeting more than a hundred victims were remembered. The troop may have counted some 200–250 boys and girls in the 1940s. I have no comparable numbers for Toldi, but they would hardly be lower.

25 ■ As mentioned above, the majority of the pupils of previous years, not segregated by religion, would have suffered fates more tragic than ours, being in the age group of those taken to labour camps or murdered in forced marches towards Germany. It would be interesting to compare the life stories of the parallel "non-Jewish" classes, but I have insufficient information to attempt anything of the sort. To be sure, there were several boys in those who, as baptised Jews, would have been in a situation rather similar to ours during the war—and, maybe, thereafter.



Éva Cs. Gyimesi

## The Dilemmas of Identity

Zoltán Tibori Szabó: *Árnyékos oldal. Zsidó identitástudat Erdélyben a Holokauszt után* (The Shady Side. Jewish Identity in Transylvania after the Holocaust). Kolozsvár: Koinónia, 2007, 326 pp.

**Z**oltán Tibori Szabó is the author of several articles and a book on Transylvanian Jews,<sup>1</sup> as well as co-editor of *The Geographical Encyclopaedia of the Hungarian Holocaust*.<sup>2</sup> His most recent book, discussed here, is about Holocaust survivors in Transylvania and their struggles to adjust to a new Europe after the Second World War.

Tibori Szabó's basis is a careful reading of the Hungarian and Romanian press in Transylvania between 1945 and 1948 and the Jewish newspapers in the Hungarian language. The survey of this vast material is accompanied by a bibliography of 182 items, showing the author's familiarity with the most recent literature. The appendices contain a list of all relevant newspapers, archival resources and interviews (oral history), as well as a useful glossary of

Hebrew and Yiddish words and terms relating to Jewish life.

The author describes sympathetically, yet systematically, the complex existential and psychological crisis of Jewish Holocaust survivors and their search for a new identity. Before presenting the core material, Tibori Szabó outlines the history of Hungarian and Transylvanian Jewry before, during and after the Second World War. Historical context is a vital part of explaining the psychological effects of the Holocaust and the identity crisis to follow.

The bulk of Transylvanian Jews had gradually been integrated into Transylvanian Hungarian society. They were loyal to the Hungarian nation, accepting the burden of a "double minority" status. Their contribution to material civilisation,

1 ■ *Élet és halál mezsgyéjén. Zsidók mentése és menekülése a magyar-román határon 1940–44 között* [On the Marches Between Life and Death. The Rescue and Escape of Jews on the Hungarian–Romanian Border Between 1940–44]. Kolozsvár: Minerva, 2004.

2 ■ Randolph L. Braham, ed., assisted by Zoltán Tibori Szabó, *A magyarországi Holokauszt földrajzi enciklopédiája* [The Geographical Encyclopedia of the Holocaust in Hungary]. 3 vols. Budapest, Park Könyvkiadó, 2007. See István Deák's review in *HQ* 192.

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crafts, urbanisation and bourgeois lifestyle is comparable to that of the Saxons, and they also enriched Hungarian culture, literature and the arts in Transylvania. Yet, with the growth of anti-Semitism, the defencelessness of the Jewish community during the war was viewed with indifference by most Hungarians and Romanians. Many Hungarians blamed Jews for the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy because of their prominent role in the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919. In addition, when, following the Treaty of Trianon, Transylvania was annexed to Romania, the Romanian regime manipulated Jewish public opinion against Hungarians. They urged them to reverse their assimilation, claiming that fascist ideology had no supporters among Romanians, only among Hungarians. Despite such pressures, most Jews accepted the burden of double discrimination, and remained confident of eventual integration.

Although in most of the cases the author's sources are rich and document the losses of Transylvanian Jewry during the Holocaust, his analysis is still affected by a scarcity of reliable records. Often, Tibori Szabó had to collect data in the archives village by village, family by family, as in the case of the deportations in the Székely region, carried out between October and December 1940 as a result of incitement against Jews originating in Hungary following the Vienna Award of 30 August 1940, which allotted the Székely lands and much of Northern Transylvania to Hungary. The deportations were carried out by the Hungarian army as well as by the local authorities with many Jews deported from Northern Transylvania, and killed up to 1942.<sup>3</sup> (To mention just a few figures: of the

151,000 Jews who lived in Northern Transylvania in 1930, 127,377 were deported and only 19,764 of them returned by May 1946.) Although the Bucharest pogroms and economic measures against Jews began as early as 1941, Jews were much better off in Romanian Southern Transylvania than in Hungarian Northern Transylvania.

Those who returned from the death camps had to face almost total deprivation under the new regime. The loss of their homes and their loved ones—few if any of the children came back—inflicted deep emotional and psychological wounds as Jewish men and women had to face new and difficult challenges. Beyond day-to-day struggles to live and recover, survivors were also faced with existential choices: should they emigrate, or should they stay? Two new generations have grown up under the burden of these suppressed emotional wounds.

**P**art I, an overview of the history of Jews in Transylvania, is followed by the discussion of the Hungarian-language Jewish press in Transylvania in Part 2. In addition to the Kolozsvár (Cluj) paper *Egység* (renamed *Új út* after 1949), used as the principal source, the author also relies on articles in a number of short-lived publications: *Deportált Híradó* (published in 1945 in Szatmárnémeti/Satu Mare), *Ichud* (1947–48, Temesvár/Timisoara) and *Új Ifjúság* (Spring 1947, Kolozsvár/Cluj). In order to counterbalance the distortions imposed by contemporary Communist ideology, the author also makes use of archival material and interviews with survivors.

Hungarian-language Jewish papers had an ambiguous role in the life and

3 ■ It became customary to refer to the whole area awarded to Hungary as Northern Transylvania.



thinking of Transylvanian Jews after the war. On the one hand,

their sheer existence in Transylvania after the war demonstrates that many of the survivors—journalists, editors and readers alike—cherished the Hungarian language and culture as their own. These journals enriched the Hungarian press in Transylvania by regularly publishing (besides news and reports) the best of Transylvanian Hungarian writing. They also represented the highest standard possible at the time as regards graphics, language and editing. In sum, they were in no way inferior to those of the contemporary Hungarian press. (pp. 276–77)

On the other hand, the presence of unfamiliar Communist jargon

made for confusion and uncertainty among the readers. [...] As a consequence, a considerable part of the Jewish community turned their back on these publications, became suspicious of solutions suggested in these journals, and searched for other identity strategies. (p. 276)

Through a rich and varied source material, Tibori Szabó scrupulously follows, week by week, the financial, legal, social, political and health problems of returning Jews. He also discusses the alleged responsibility of leaders of the Jewish community in the deportations, as well as the trials held by postwar People's Tribunals and the sentences passed, including the hotly debated issue of the rescue operation organised by Cluj lawyer-journalist Rudolf Kastner.

The traumas of postwar years were accompanied by the gradual emergence of dictatorial mechanisms which rapidly eroded what was still a relatively intact system of values. The articles reveal gaps in the administration of justice in hastily arranged trials. There were humane acts

and reviving anti-Semitism alongside each other. But essentially, what we witness here is how Jewish organisations and institutions gradually accepted the anti-democratic yoke and tried to internalise its political slogans and thinking. As professions traditionally chosen by Jews (medicine, law, commerce) were considered unproductive, the political elite set "social re-stratification" as one of its most urgent goals. In other words, members of the Jewish community were urged to become members of the working class. It was an advantage both for non-Jewish Hungarians and Romanians to have workers or peasants as parents (this reviewer herself felt quite uneasy at school as the daughter of a public servant), but in the case of Jews, an entire ethnic group was stigmatised as "unproductive". Vital questions concerning the suffering of Jews and their ensuing identity crisis were gradually downgraded in the larger context of the "ever more acute class struggle". Jews were often portrayed as engaged either in black-marketeering or idling their time away in cafés. A pragmatic approach to *aliyah* (emigration to Israel) was replaced by an over-simplified, violent anti-Zionism.

**T**he presentation and discussion of the Transylvanian Jewish press is followed by an equally thorough introduction to the Hungarian and Romanian press in Transylvania (Parts 3–4). The examination of the contemporary Hungarian press brings to light new data on how the Hungarian Calvinist Church (and Bishop János Vásárhelyi in person) tried to help Jews in Southern Transylvania. As Tibori Szabó points out, confiscated Jewish property and population movements were hardly discussed in the contemporary Hungarian press. This chapter, too, tells



of the gradual disappearance of commemorations of the Holocaust, and the tendency to downplay its horrors and emphasise the suffering of the Communists and the working class instead.

In 1947, the daily *Igazság* still published an (unsigned) article about the ghettos. A year later, on the anniversary of the liberation of the Buchenwald concentration camp, the fact that the vast majority of the victims were Jews was left unmentioned. Cultural remembrance was deformed by the newly emerging minority neurosis of the Hungarians, as well as by mutual recriminations. By and large, the—exclusively left-wing—press and the media in general tended to discuss the tragedy of the Jewish people in the context of the losses of all the other nations during the Nazi period. In addition, the press regularly reminded Jews that it was the Soviet Army that saved them, so they should gratefully serve the new regime.

The Romanian press (Part 4) took advantage of deteriorating Jewish–Hungarian relations. They claimed that “while the Jews were more than safe in Romania during the persecutions, the barbarian Hungarians dragged hundreds of thousands of them into the German death camps”. Thus, they declared, Hungarians had no right to protest against the forced relocation of Hungarians from Slovakia after the war. Generally speaking, the regime and the press cynically manipulated the different ethnic groups and did everything to turn them against each other. Zoltán Tibori Szabó is one of those rare scholars who document the responsibility of the Iron Guard and the Antonescu government in destroying a large part of the Jewish population in Romania, refuting the oft-spoken Romanian claim that it was only Hungarians who took part in the killing of Jews.

Parts 1–4 add up to an authentic and faithful description of the everyday life of an ethnic, religious and cultural community. Accurate data and some distance from the period help support an objective analysis. Footnotes with bibliographical references to the articles constitute almost a fifth of the book.

All this is background for Part 5, an overview of transforming Jewish identity in the postwar period. Before discussing the feeling of identity of returning Transylvanian Jews and the alternatives offered by the new conditions, Tibori Szabó looks at recent theories of identity. Comparing static (objective) and constructivist (subjective) approaches to identity, he opts for the latter, which argues that “the survival of a group is not contingent on the survival of objective criteria, but on the continuity of the symbolic (invented) borders determined by the individuals belonging to the group.” (p. 224) Tibori Szabó starts out from the often conflicting relationship between self-definition and definition by others, highlighting the absurdity of the existential situation of a person with an identity forced upon him or her by others and thus deprived of his/her elementary right of choice. He discusses those factors which determine Jewish identity: religious-cultural belonging; a constant oscillation between frustration caused by anti-Semitism and the wish to assimilate; and the awareness of a common fate. According to the Jewish philosopher André Neher, the complexity of this identity results in a continuous tension between the individual and the universal. Being a Hebrew opens up the perspective of a continuous urge towards the universal and towards self-transcendence, while rejection by the surrounding environment imprisons him or her into the solitude of a particular—Israelite—existence.



The burden of this common fate was felt especially bitterly by those survivors who were not brought up as Jews. The definition used by Sartre—it is others who define one as Jewish—was applied to each of them, without exception. Tibori Szabó mentions some noted survivors of the Holocaust who committed suicide later (Tadeusz Borowski, Primo Levi, Paul Celan and others). He discusses in detail the case of Jean Améry, whose philosophy of an absurd Jewish existence—the state of not being a non-Jew—entailed “invited death”, that is, suicide, for him. Jewishness as being an outcast is also part of Imre Kertész’s definition of his own identity. However, having experienced life in a leftist dictatorship, Kertész has chosen his own works as his “home”. Writing about his life in Berlin, he once said,

If nothing else remains, I can still claim my right to being a foreigner here, on earth, and in heaven. Country? Home? Motherland? Perhaps someday it will be possible to speak about these in a different way, or not at all. Perhaps people will realise that these are abstract ideas and all they need for life is just a liveable place. I have suspected this for quite a long time.<sup>4</sup>

Another strategy was to become cosmopolitan migrants or citizens of Israel where they sometimes face an aggressive Jewish nationalism. However, it seems that all over the world both Zionists and anti-Semites despise assimilated diaspora Jews.

Having delineated the alternatives that Western Jews faced, Tibori Szabó evaluates the strategies of Transylvanian Jews (Part 6). While most emigrated, and some opted to become Romanians, many

Transylvanian Jews stayed behind and insisted on their status as members of the majority and on a faith in leftist values. Thus, at the time of the third anniversary of the liberation, many of them still honestly believed that through the coming into being of a new, Soviet-type society, religious and national characteristics will disappear, or their importance will shrink. For the international working class it will be a matter of no importance if they are Jews. That is why they strove in that romantic era of great hopes to embed the problems of Jews in the problems of Romanians, Hungarians, French, Italian, Polish and other peoples. In the West it was Jorge Semprun who adopted this perspective, which later proved to be a utopia.

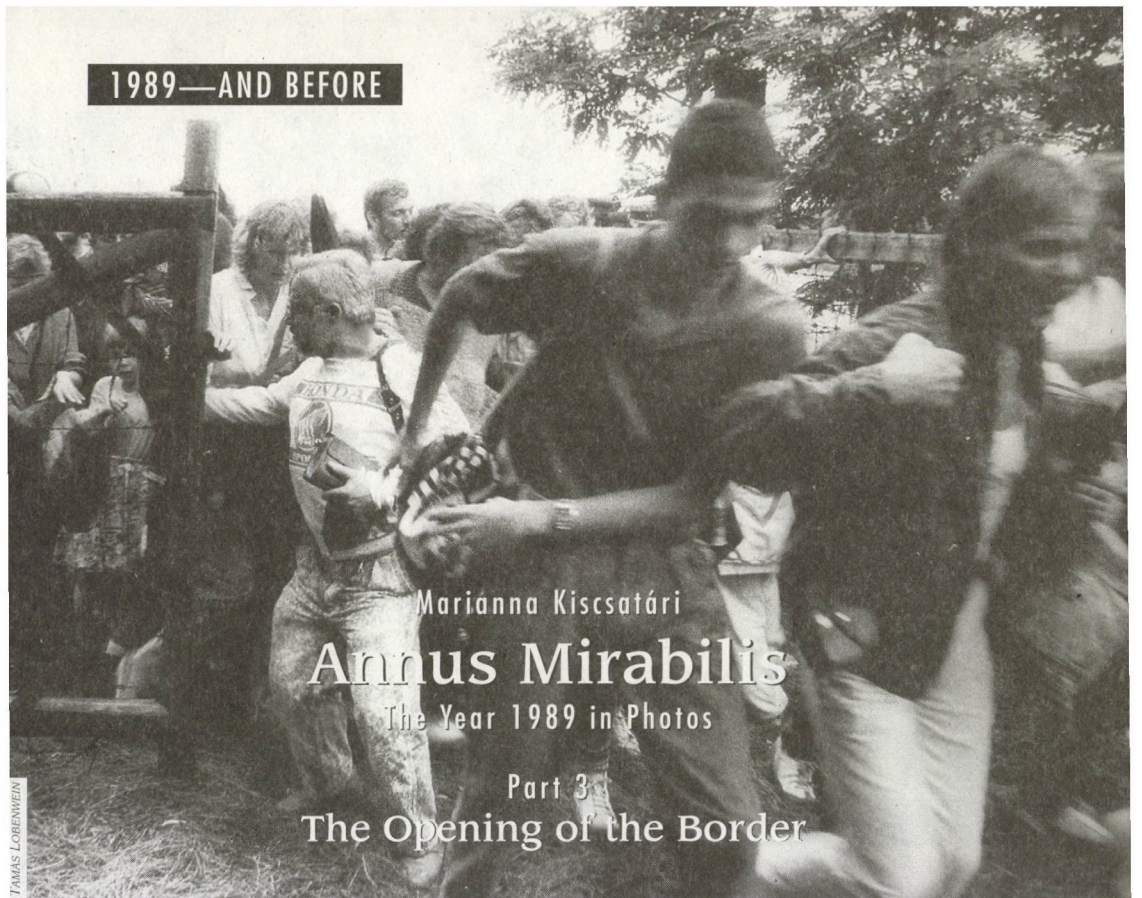
Although the contemporary press continuously echoed such declarations of loyalty to the host nation by the Jews, the tension between Hungarians and Jews did not disappear, but became even more acute at times. Both sides carried a heavy burden, which was unfortunately never openly discussed. Yet, facing what had happened and discussing it without inhibitions, would have been the only remedy. The fact that this did not happen delayed indefinitely the creation of a common ground for reconciliation between the two communities.

Tibori Szabó quotes Imre Tóth, a mathematician and philosopher who left Transylvania. He claims—as well as André Neher, Ágnes Heller and György Konrád—that Jews are a force “that works for the unification of mankind, for the achievement of universality, with a perseverance that knows no compromise”<sup>5</sup>. No Christian dogma denies such a desire. ❧

4 ■ Imre Kertész, “Miért Berlin?” [Why Berlin?]. *Múlt és Jövő*, 2006/4–5.

5 ■ Imre Tóth, *Zsidónak lenni Auschwitz után* [Being a Jew after Auschwitz]. Budapest: Pont Kiadó, 2001, pp. 23–25.





Marianna Kiscsatári  
**Annus Mirabilis**  
The Year 1989 in Photos  
Part 3  
**The Opening of the Border**

*"The 10th of September 1989, when the Hungarian borders opened for Germans arriving from the GDR as well, was a historic milestone for both our states and peoples. On that day, it was Hungary who took the first brick out of the Berlin Wall."*

*Helmut Kohl*

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*Marianna Kiscsatári*

*is curator of the contemporary section (1956 up to the present) of the Historical Photographic Collection of the Hungarian National Museum, Budapest, which holds all the photographs in this article.*

*Much of the text accompanying the photos was based on*

*From Dictatorship to Democracy. The Birth of the Third Hungarian Republic 1988–2001 by Ignác Romsics (East European Monographs, No. DCCXXII. Social Science Monographs, Boulder, Colorado. Atlantic Research and Publications, Inc. Highland Lakes, New Jersey, 2007. Distributed by Columbia University Press, New York, vii + 471 pp.).*





**N**egotiations took place under the auspices of what was first called the Opposition Roundtable and, from June, the National Roundtable with almost 600 representatives: 288 from organisations in the Opposition Roundtable, 101 from the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP) and 184 representing movements and organizations affiliated with the MSZMP.

On 13 June, talks of historic significance started unfolding in parallel subcommittees. Under the terms of the agreement signed on 18 September, the sides agreed on the framework for replacing the single-party dictatorship by a multi-party democracy on the basic principles of six fundamental bills.

Agreements on constitutional questions in and of themselves laid the foundations for revolutionary changes, famously dubbed a "negotiated revolution" by political scientists László Bruszt and Rudolf Tőkés.



*Architects of a negotiated revolution.  
Budapest, 4 September 1989.*

*Back row from left to right: **Balázs Horváth** (various ministerial posts including minister of the interior, 1990–1993), **Péter Tölgyessy** (a key participant at the National Roundtable talks on drafting the new constitution, MP for the Alliance of Free Democrats, 1990–96, and for the Federation of Young Democrats, 1998–2006), **László Salamon** (MP for the Hungarian Democratic Forum, 1990–96, and for the Federation of Young Democrats 1996–) and **László Sólyom** (president of the Constitutional Court, 1990–98, president of the Republic of Hungary since 2005). In front: **György Szabád** (joined the Hungarian Democratic Forum in 1987, speaker of Parliament 1990–94). Seated: **József Antall\*** (chairman of the Hungarian Democratic Forum from October 1989, and prime minister from May 1990 up to his death in 1993), **Viktor Orbán** (founding member and chairman of Fidesz, the Federation of Young Democrats, prime minister, 1998–2002).*

\* On how József Antall was shadowed by the secret services see Sándor Révész's article on pp. 113–122 of this issue.

Decisions connected with the amendment of the Constitution were based on entirely new values, in many respects reminiscent of Law I of 1946. Hungary would be transformed from a "People's Republic" to a "Republic", and one in which both the principles of "bourgeois democracy" and of "democratic socialism" would prevail. The passage referring to the leading role of "the Marxist-Leninist party of the working class" was eliminated and a multi-party system declared. The country's economy was defined as a market economy in which "public and private property enjoy equal protection" and which "recognises and supports the right of enterprise and the freedom of competition." Parliament was to be elevated to the supreme state authority. In addition to legislation, the most important decisions on personnel, such as the election of members of the government and heads of other important state agencies, came under the exclusive authority of Parliament. ■



**A**ugust 1989 saw demonstrations in various European cities calling for the immediate demolition of the Berlin Wall. Vörösmarty Square in central Budapest was the scene of one such protest, organised jointly by the East–West Circle for Dialogue, the Federation of Young Democrats, the Hungarian October Party and other opposition groups. The Hungarian speakers and their foreign guests from a number of countries all spoke about the Berlin Wall being the prime example of the division of Europe, claiming that what had started as a demarcation of areas of military occupation had led to economic, political, environmental and cultural divisions on an unprecedented scale. The unanimous view was that a dismantling of both armaments and ideologies had to be carried out. ❧



*Demonstration against the Berlin Wall. Vörösmarty Square, Budapest, 13 August 1989.*



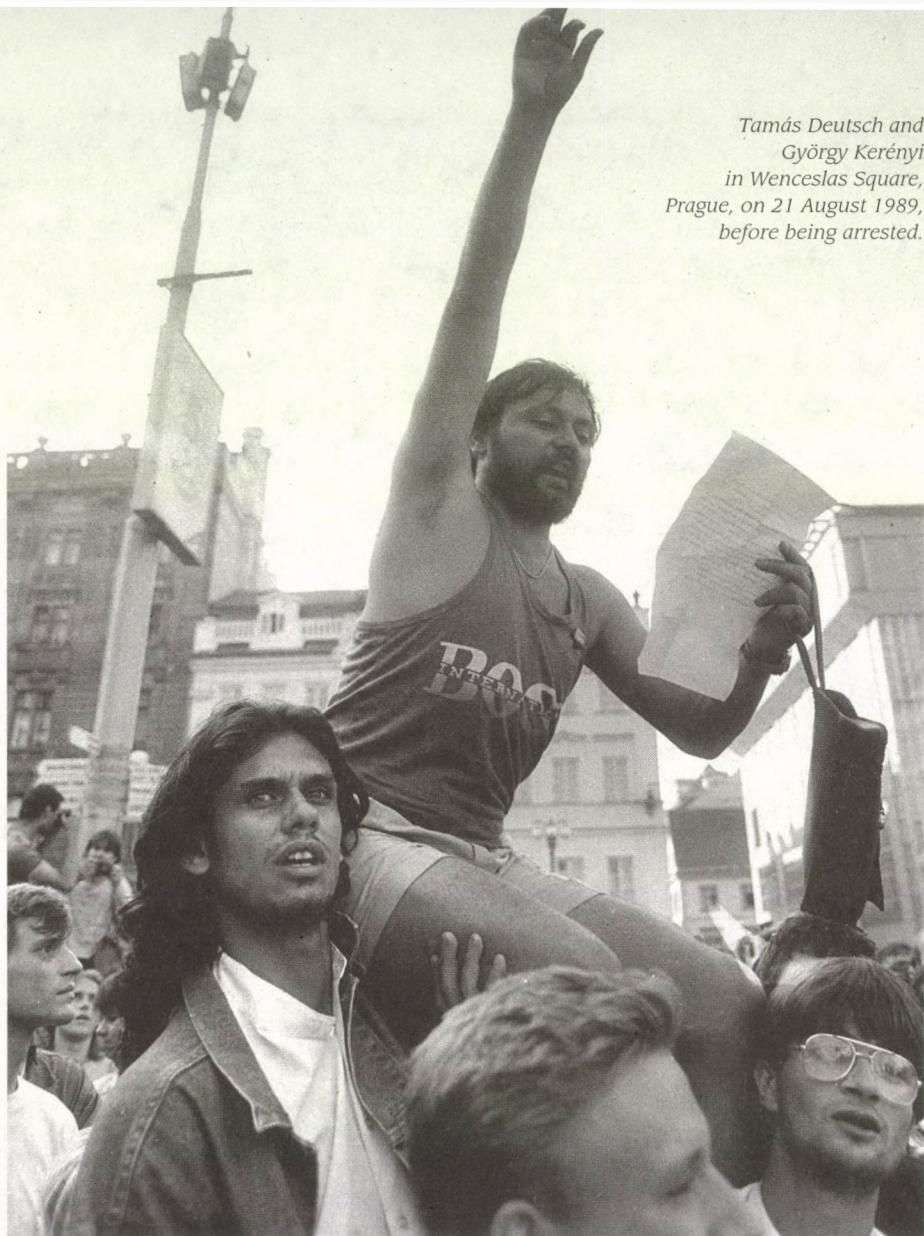


*László Rajk Jr speaking at a rally of the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ) on Margaret Island. Budapest, 13 August 1989.*

**F**ive hundred people turned up at a rally held on Margaret Island by the local organisation of the Alliance of Free Democrats in Budapest's 13th District. Gáspár Miklós Tamás, László Rajk Jr. and Gábor Demszky, who were by then publicly known figures of a party which had grown out of the former democratic opposition, outlined a political programme. Hungary, they argued, needed to reconnect to Europe, which could only be done by a democratic state based on the rule of law with the appropriate economic institutions. The major goal was to reform the principles of the law governing the ownership of property. Elections needed to be held as soon as the most basic conditions were satisfied. 🐼



*Tamás Deutsch and  
György Kerényi  
in Wenceslas Square,  
Prague, on 21 August 1989,  
before being arrested.*



ANDRÁS BANKUTI

**O**n 21 August a crowd of several tens of thousands gathered on Wenceslas Square in Prague to commemorate the anniversary of the 1968 invasion. The Hungarians read out a petition in which they asked the Czechoslovaks to forgive them for taking part in the 1968 intervention. Using water cannons and tear gas, police brutally dispersed the crowd. Almost 400 people were arrested, including nine Hungarians. Seven of them were released within two days; György Kerényi and Tamás Deutsch, a leading figure of the Federation of Young Democrats, were prosecuted.



Hungarian–Czechoslovak relations, like Romanian–Hungarian relations, had been tense for years, although less venomous. It was mainly the plight of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia that concerned Budapest, while Prague objected to the reform processes in Hungary. In addition, starting in May, the construction of the Nagymaros–Gabčíkovo barrage system became a source of friction. Because of all this, it was feared that the Czechoslovak authorities would take harsh measures against the two Hungarians. In order to secure their release, activists of the Federation of Young Democrats began a hunger strike in front of the Czechoslovak embassy in Budapest. On 28 August, Foreign Minister Gyula Horn summoned the Czechoslovak chargé d'affaires in Budapest and informed him that Hungary was issuing a formal complaint against the treatment of two Hungarian citizens held in custody.

Thanks to the protests and action by Hungarian diplomats, Kerényi and Deutsch eventually got off with a fine of 5,000 Czechoslovak crowns each. After paying, they were immediately expelled from the country. 🇮🇪

ANDRÁS BÁNKÓTTI



*László Pesti, cameraman of the video news Black Box being taken under arrest by the Czech police at the demonstration on the anniversary of the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Prague, 21 August 1989.*





IMRE PROHÁSZKA

*Parking metres and pensioner in Király Street, in Budapest's Seventh District. Budapest, 1989.*

**B**ecause of the structural transformation of the economy, the gap between the upper and lower strata continued to widen in 1989. The bonuses of some 200 company managers exceeded two million forints; indeed, a few even reached 5-8 million, while the gross average income was 13,000 forints and the average pension slightly more than 5,000 forints. For the majority of Hungarians, socialised in the spirit of egalitarianism, such differences were unacceptable.

By the autumn of 1989 the official number of the jobless had risen to 22,000. They received a monthly benefit of 4,200-4,300 forints on average, similar to the pension. The number of those looking for work was much higher, amounting, according to estimates, to around 100,000. The increase in the unemployment rate, estimated on the basis of the number of registered unemployed and active earners, accelerated in 1989. In late 1987, 0.24 per cent of active wage-earners were unable to find work, in late 1988 the figure rose to 0.35 per cent and reached 1.24 per cent by the summer of 1990. Around one fifth of unemployed lived in Budapest, and nearly two thirds lived in towns. Around 50 per cent were untrained and unskilled workers with only an elementary school education. ❧





ANDREA FRATELLO

*Comecon market in Mátészalka. August 1989.*



ANDRÁS BAKSZTI

*Inner courtyard of temporary accommodation. Budapest, 1989.*

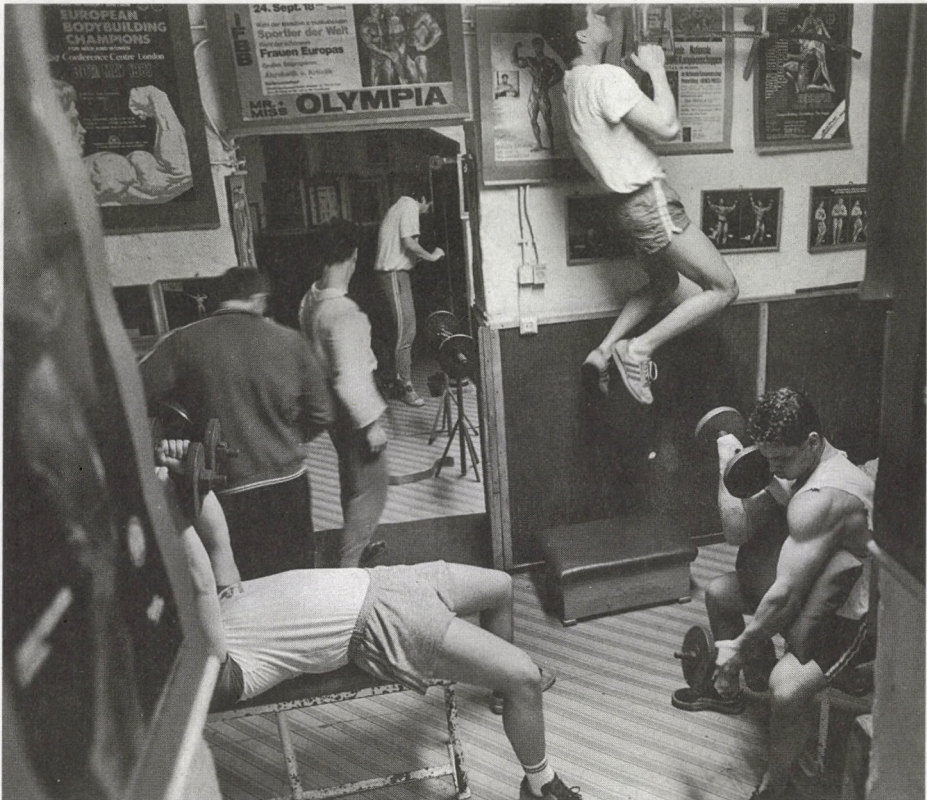






and the extraordinarily difficult conditions in which it had to be mined. At the time the mine benefited the city of Pécs as the mining concern built over 5,700 dwellings in an area of the city known as Uránváros (Uranium Town).

The mine was closed for largely political reasons: the break-up of the Soviet Union and the resulting end to the nuclear arms race. This had anyway led to a drastic fall in the world market for uranium. The Hungarian government decided as long ago as the autumn of 1989 to close the mine, but the process lingered on until 2006 because the entire area around the operations had to be decontaminated and re-cultivated, a long and costly process. The closure in itself directly affected an estimated 8,000 jobs, but indirectly several thousands more lost theirs as a result. 🐼



JÁRE BENKÓ

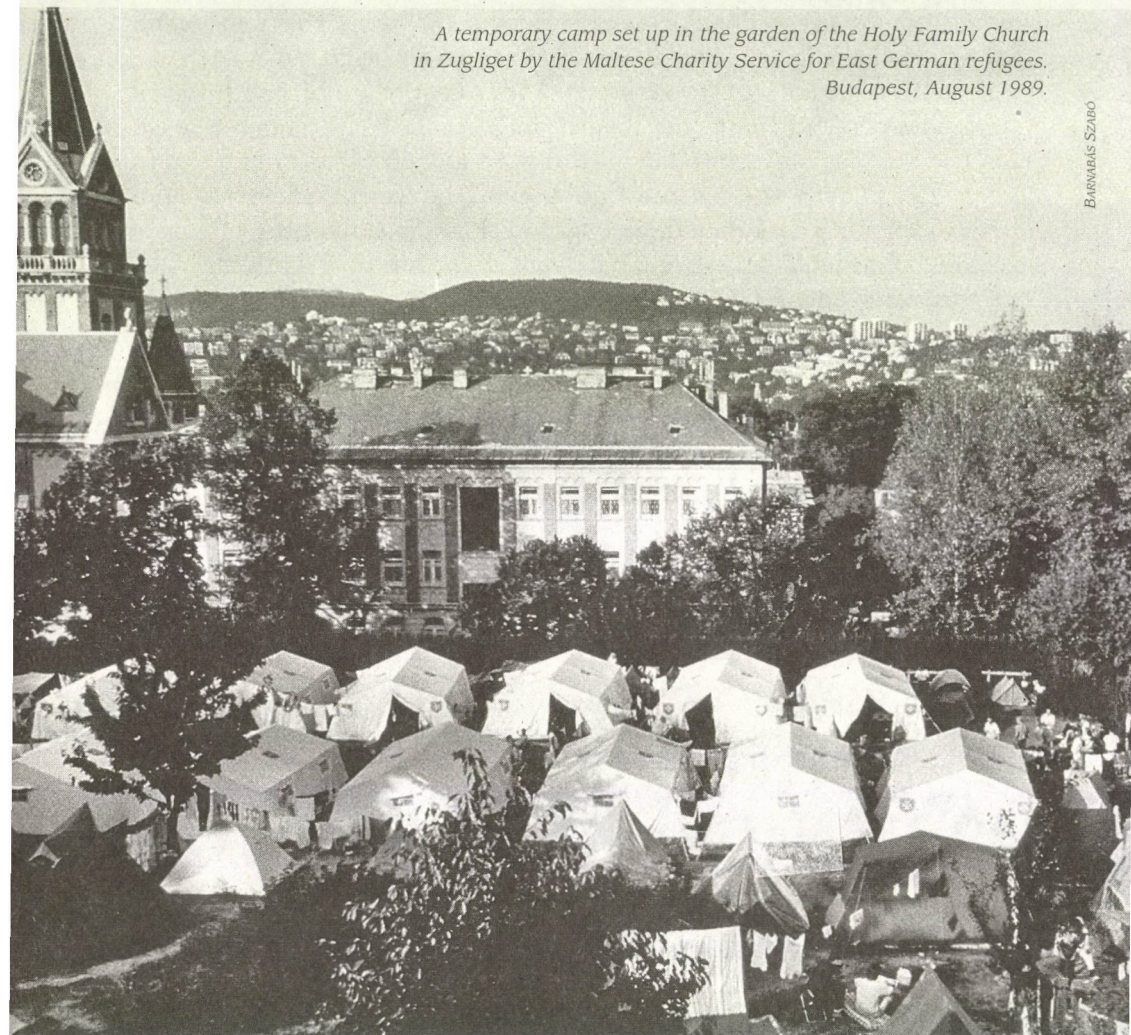
*Bodybuilders in an Angyalföld gymnasium. Budapest, 1989.*

**F**oreign films featuring body builders became common on Hungarian TV from the early 1980s. By around 1985–86 the first “sweat rooms”, as they were called, appeared in Hungary, offering weight training and various fitness machines. A “gymnasium hall” in Budapest’s generally working-class Angyalföld (13th) district was available for training two or three times a week. 🐼



*A temporary camp set up in the garden of the Holy Family Church in Zugliget by the Maltese Charity Service for East German refugees. Budapest, August 1989.*

BARMABÁS SZABÓ



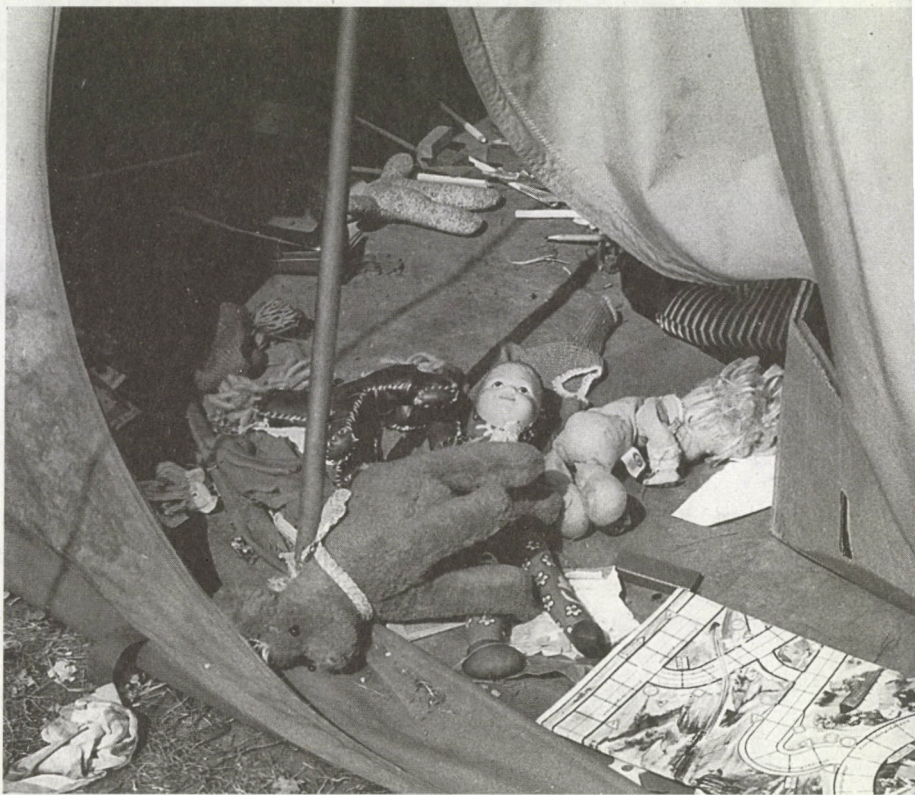
**M**any GDR citizens had been spending their summers at Lake Balaton for years. They loved the fresh water, warmer than the North Sea, could still afford Hungarian prices, and could meet their West German relatives. Because of Transylvanian refugees, Hungary signed the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees on 19 March 1989. Under its terms no one seeking asylum could be sent back to the country from which he had come against his free will. The dismantling in April of the border defences between Austria and Hungary gave further encouragement to East Germans whose number, over the course of the summer, continued to grow. Clearly, they did not wish to return to the GDR, some of them camping around the West German embassy in Budapest or in its courtyard, others staying in Buda at a children's camp



in Csillebérc, or on the premises of the Maltese Charity Service in the Zugliget district and elsewhere.

Throughout the summer the East German authorities repeatedly requested the extradition of those wishing to leave the country. They referred to the 1969 extradition agreement between the GDR and Hungary and to previous practice. In a climate when Hungarian opposition organisations, the Churches and public opinion emphatically expressed their sympathy for the refugees their extradition would not only have discredited the Hungarian government internationally but provoked discontent at home as well. The Hungarian leadership resisted the demands of Honecker and his party, and decided to give the green light to East Germans wishing to leave by temporarily opening the border.

The first group left Hungary on 19 August when in the spirit of Europe without borders the Hungarian Democratic Forum and



TAMÁS SZIGETI

*Abandoned tent with toys at the temporary quarters set up for East German refugees at Csillebérc on Széchenyi Hill on the western outskirts of Buda. Budapest, September 1989.*



*East German holidaymakers  
at a temporarily opened Hungarian-Austrian  
frontier crossing.  
Sopronpüszta, 19 August 1989*



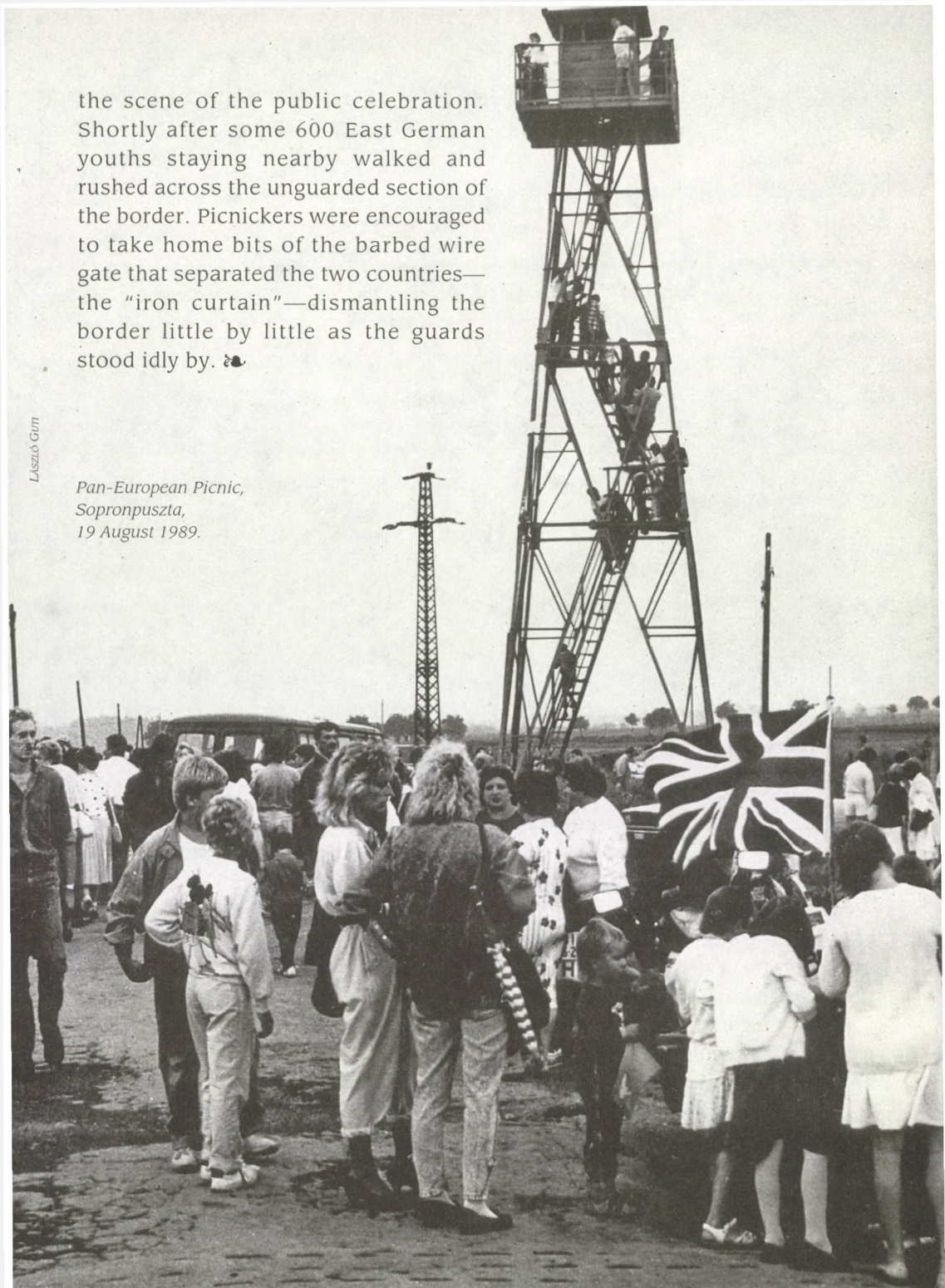
other opposition organisations organised what came to be called the “Pan-European Picnic” near the border in Sopron. The idea originated with Otto von Habsburg’s daughter Walburga. Her father, the president of the Pan-European Union, and the event’s other patron, Minister of State Imre Pozsgay, also embraced the project. Minister of the Interior István Horváth ensured that Hungarian border guards did not intervene. After the Austrians expressed their willingness to accept or let the refugees pass, there was nothing left but to inform them: if on 19 August they “just happened” to be staying in the area around Sopron, they were free to leave unimpeded. This is precisely what happened. Invitations, maps, flyers and press releases invited Hungarians and Austrians to the picnic. Less officially, East Germans visiting Hungary were also invited to the event. Thousands of people showed up, and the open fields became a mass celebration of food, drink and freedom. A Hungarian delegation crossed over to Austria, where they symbolically opened a gate and then, together with Austrian citizens, returned across the now-open border to



the scene of the public celebration. Shortly after some 600 East German youths staying nearby walked and rushed across the unguarded section of the border. Picnickers were encouraged to take home bits of the barbed wire gate that separated the two countries—the “iron curtain”—dismantling the border little by little as the guards stood idly by. 🍷

LASZLÓ GURTI

*Pan-European Picnic,  
Sopronpuszta,  
19 August 1989.*







BARBARA SZABO

*The barrier is still closed but the refugees are free to go. Hegyeshalom, September 1989.*

**A**t the news of the Pan-European Picnic, the number of GDR holidaymakers refusing to return home jumped overnight by several thousand. On 25 August Németh and Horn secretly flew to Bonn where they met Chancellor Kohl, Foreign Minister Genscher and others. During the course of the talks the Hungarians declared that “unless some external force prevents us, we will open the borders to citizens of the GDR.” Shortly after, the Hungarian government announced in a press release that Hungary would unilaterally cancel the 1969 agreement between the Hungarian and East German governments. In the future it would guarantee the chance for all East German citizens staying in Hungary to leave. The historic moment, the opening of the border, finally took place on 11 September. The Hungarian government informed the Soviet leadership of its decision on 8 September. The latter, however, had probably learnt of the Hungarians’ intentions earlier from Chancellor Kohl and other sources.

Up until the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November, approximately 60,000 had “voted with their feet”. With a step of historic significance, the Hungarian government accelerated the collapse of the East German regime and boosted the process leading to the reunification of the two German states. 🇩🇪



Sándor Révész

# One Day It Has to Come Out

Gábor Tabajdi & Krisztián Ungváry: *Elhallgatott múlt. A pártállam és a belügy. A politikai rendőrség működése Magyarországon 1956–1990*

(Silenced Past: the Party-State and the Interior Ministry.

The Operation of the Political Police in Hungary, 1956–1990).

Budapest: 1956-os Intézet & Corvina, 2008, 515 pp.

János M. Rainer: *Jelentések hálójában. Antall József és az állambiztonság emberei 1957–1989* (In a Web of Reports. József Antal and the Shattered Mirrors of State Security Men, 1957–1989).

Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 2008, 295 pp.

It has taken twenty years for the first comprehensive account of Hungary's Communist-era secret police to come out, but at last three books are starting to fill in the details.

Gábor Tabajdi's and Krisztián Ungváry's careful study finally begins to unravel how the informer network operated. From a different angle, János Rainer's book looks at this same topic by meticulously describing a specific case, that of József Antall, the man who became Hungary's prime minister in 1990, and whom the old regime had kept under close observation for decades. Though not reviewed here, we also at last have the Kenedi Committee report to refer to. This examines disclosure of secret-service files and the obstacles put in the way of opening these most sensitive of archives.

The real story is not just about an apparatus that was a few thousand strong. "What is at stake in the uncovering of the secret services is not that as many as possible learn who was in the network... The real issue is who did what on a case-by-case basis" (Tabajdi and Ungváry, p.14). There were all manner of encroachments into daily life. The intelligence apparatus sought to recruit the young into the youth organisation and adults into the network of the party-state—more often than not successfully so. And the list is a long one. If Hungarians had faced up to how they lived through the Kádár years, they might have drawn the conclusion that everyone who supported the regime could perhaps have been responsible, albeit to varying degrees, for the operation of the secret services.

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Sándor Révész

a historian and journalist, is an editor on the daily *Népszabadság* and the monthly *Beszélő*. He is the author of *Antall József távolról (József Antall, from a Distance, 1995)*. His latest book is a collection of articles on the four years of the centre-right government led by Viktor Orbán (1998–2002), published in *Népszabadság*.



The mystery surrounding the secret services will only be dispelled if we see clearly the hierarchy of responsibilities. Even under the totalitarian dictatorship of the Rákosi years, from 1949 to 1954, the Party was able to exert control over the political police and signal who was truly in control through liquidations and show trials of individuals up to the level of minister of the interior, and even seemingly untouchable demigods like the leaders of the state-security apparatus itself. However, during the Kádár era there was no longer any need for such ostentatious signals.

We learn from Tabajdi and Ungváry that the task of the Hungarian security forces after the violent crushing of the 1956 revolution was no longer to keep society as a whole living in a climate of terror, but to keep the peace. They were no longer expected to manufacture as many internal enemies, political crimes and criminals as possible to keep the courts, prisons and Party propaganda machine busy, but, on the contrary, to ensure that there were as few internal enemies and political crimes as possible.

The Party apparatus launched this inverted strategy by sacking the old guard to start with. Resistance that arose from interior-ministry groups and sectional interests was harshly suppressed. State-security organs were, after all, supposed to work under direct Party guidance, with the Party determining the goals, the strategy, and the identity of their enemies.

Resolutions of the Party intervened in the work of the Ministry of the Interior even in given cases, down to the level of individual operational matters... Members of the Politburo also had a part in this, but so equally did all secretaries of the Central Committee. The various instructions issued by the Ministry always include the reference that all information has to be forwarded to the relevant Party and state organs. (Tabajdi and Ungváry, p. 21)

Even in matters of staffing party instructions had a priority. Every appointment, promotion or commendation required the approval of the responsible Party organ. It often happened that the interests of state security were relegated to second place, or that promises that case officers or minders made to agents working in the network could not be met because of instructions received from state and Party organs. "Those employed to avert internal reaction occupied a far less privileged position in the Party-state than did the Party's full-time functionaries". (Tabajdi and Ungváry, p. 92)

The politicians and Party functionaries who gave the orders at every level exercised firm and explicit control over the apparatchiks of the Ministry of the Interior, and that was what counted. (The district Party committees also supervised, gave instructions to and received reports from the Ministry's district organs.) Not only among those running the network of informers or the state-security apparatus, but even at the highest levels of the Ministry there was no one with powers and responsibilities that bore any comparison with those in



high-ranking posts, several of whom remain, even today, emblematic figures for one major political camp or other.

The hierarchy was similar at every level. Cadres of various ranks outside the secret services, if entrusted with the task of furnishing confidential information, were more often than not the most eager to furnish it. Ungváry shows strikingly, discussing the Dialógus movement, an oppositional alternative peace initiative in Pécs in the early eighties, that, "contrary to public belief, most of the denunciations under the Kádár regime did not come from agents but through casual social and official contacts." "Compared to the 19 agents who were mobilised over Dialógus, it was apparatchiks in the Party and the Young Communists' Organisation, not those in the 'network' category, who were more important, and in Pécs as elsewhere played the most prominent and dirtiest roles." (Tabajdi and Ungváry, p. 417)

**T**he sources show clearly that a much wider circle of people than the network of agents were responsible for the disadvantages, and even vilification, suffered by thousands of people. This makes it hardly surprising that researchers pushing for freedom of information on state surveillance find little support. The response to publications that do find their way to a wider readership is jittery, with researchers generally being accused of the very thing that is least true of them, i.e. that they are only interested in unmasking and pillorying those who were recruited into the informer network. They are criticised for pursuing witch-hunts. This claim is countered in every chapter of Tabajdi and Ungváry's book. Already in the Preface they point out that priorities should lie elsewhere:

most argument about uncovering Hungary's past has, sadly, revolved around the issue of whether some individual was an agent. In the course of public debates much is heard about the matter of agents, or committees of agents and lists of agents, whereas interest in the mechanics of the regime is not particularly large. (Tabajdi and Ungváry, p. 11)

The biggest contribution of the book is to show that being recruited was not the decisive part. After all "half of the new recruits did not even turn up for a second meeting [with their handler] as an agent!" and, "due to narrowing of the channels for obtaining intelligence and to passive resistance, 20 per cent of all agents were discarded every year." (Tabajdi and Ungváry, p. 292)

Among those who had the greatest experience of the secret services, and who were hardened during the 1950s in the Gulag or the notorious forced labour camp set up at the copper mine of Recsk, were three anti-German army officers of the Horthy era, Ottó Hátszegi-Hatz, Gyula Kádár and Kálmán Kéri. All three of them, as a chapter about them discusses, were recruited, but they also knew enough about what they were doing to be able to evade the task.



A large part of their work as agents was taken up by preparing reports about each other. Each masterfully played down the task, and for quite a long time they succeeded in doing so, which is hardly surprising given that all three were outstanding army officers and far better instructed in the tricks of the secret-service trade than their nominal masters, as well as being good friends. (Tabajdi and Ungváry, p. 269)

It emerges from the staggering, even astounding story of Ottó Hátszegi-Hatz's (1902–1977) life what extraordinary personal integrity or severe sacrifices a person could give proof of, if they were unlucky enough to become entangled with intelligence organisations. This well-trained, successful army officer (and also world champion fencer at foil) served during the Second World War as Hungarian military attaché in Ankara and was one of the key figures in Horthy's attempts to get out of the War. He became involved in intricate double and triple games with the Allied, German and, of course, the Hungarian secret services in the interest of all kinds of noble aims, such as assisting Poles who had fled to Hungary, passing on aid parcels, making contacts with the western Allies, and so on. In November 1944, he flew over to join Soviet troops and played a part in anti-fascist propaganda efforts, but meanwhile back in Hungary his mother and his fiancée, judged to be Jewish, were arrested and then hauled off to be liquidated in Ravensbrück. In 1945 he was arrested by the NKVD, and sentenced to 25 years of forced labour, which was the automatic term for any "enemy" military attaché. He was released in 1955, returned to Hungary, got married and had children and was active as a fencing coach.

Hátszegi strove to maintain good relations with everybody as a diplomat-cum-mediator and strove to win everybody's confidence, which left him open to accusations and blackmail from all quarters. As a condition for being allowed to be rehabilitated in Hungary, to live peacefully and rebuild his existence, he had to let himself be recruited into the informer network and to maintain contacts with former fellow officers who were living abroad in exile, write reports on them and help in recruiting them too into the network.

Hátszegi did not trust the regime, and the Ministry did not trust Hátszegi. Rehabilitation failed to come about, he was treated with ever greater severity; his home was bugged, he was shadowed, a large number of agents kept him under observation, he was provoked, made to write "declarations of honesty". He was supposed to prove his loyalty by, among other things, participating in the recruitment of his younger brother, who was then living in Austria. A heart complaint that he suffered from was worsened by stress. He worked for a few years in the GDR as a fencing coach for the sports club of the East German police, who then loaned him to the Stasi. He was shut out of the network of agents a couple of years before he died in 1977, without their even bothering to inform him. Hátszegi bore a long, forced secret-service contact for the whole time without ever establishing any confidential relationship with the officers



who handled him, without ever identifying with either the service or his tasks, and last but not least, without ever being of any real use to the secret service.

Kálmán Kéri (1901–94) was chief of staff to the Hungarian 1st Army in early October 1944, when Horthy signalled his willingness to accept the Allies' conditions for a provisional ceasefire. Kéri joined the deputation that was setting off for Moscow to formally sign the terms. Following the war, he was arrested in 1949 and sent to an internment camp and a work camp, then on release worked as a night watchman, an unskilled labourer, warehouse-man and cellar man. He was finally rehabilitated in 1990, re-appointed to the army at the rank of major general (later lieutenant general), and became the oldest M.P. in the first intake (1990–94). It is now known that he, too, compromised as little as he could with the security services under Kádár, to the point that he was eventually thrown out on account of his stubbornly unforthcoming reports. All the same, it hardly bears thinking what would have happened if it had come out under the central-right Antall administration that one of the symbolic historical figureheads of the government coalition had actually been a recruited agent of Kádár's secret service.

**T**he lesson that can be drawn from this book is that no general conclusions can be drawn about the possibility of refusing to cooperate with the state-security services. There are large numbers of nameless citizens of quite ordinary mettle who were able to, and did in fact, refuse to cooperate without any particularly unpleasant consequences, whereas for others such refusal had shattering consequences. Potential recruits were in such varied positions that in some cases it took a lot more courage to cooperate nominally than it did for some others to flatly refuse to cooperate.

Both of the books under review are helpful in giving a better understanding of the extent to which, and in what sense, the Kádár dictatorship could be said to have been totalitarian. A key sentence occurs in the summing-up chapter of János Rainer's book: "From the early Sixties on, the service did not seek to be *omnipotent* so much as *omnipresent*" (Rainer, pp. 261–162; emphasis as in the original). That was exactly the stance of the post-1956 consolidation. The Kádár regime reduced its totalitarianism inasmuch as this was possible by any state in the Soviet camp. It did not aspire to total terrorisation of society, or to have a monolithic say on how people thought, lived their lives or earned a living; in short, it gave up the role of being an omnipotent power. It was not, however, able to give up its claim to undivided (i.e. total) political legitimacy, because that was the very nub of the Soviet-style exercise of power. If a legitimate, constitutional opposition is not allowed to exist, then every activity, person and group represents a threat to national security should it carry the seeds of dissidence. That is conceivable about almost anything or anybody. The logic by which such a regime operates regards as dissidence anything that deliberately obstructs the assertion of the will of the Party enmeshing society.



Furthermore, since the will of the Party, like a political will of any kind, infringes interests and generates contrary opinions, the potential for dissidence is likewise total. There is no nook or cranny of society that might not harbour the threat of dissidence, which in turn means that there is a necessity for the state-security service to be omnipresent and have oversight of everything.

The Kádár regime, as with many apparently monolithic states, saw the striking of informal bargains. This left scope for individual and collective aspirations. Though any ranking of costs and benefits ruled out open dissidence for most people, there remained some limited room for manoeuvre. Thus, from the standpoint of national security, the potential for dissidence was total, whereas in practice it was minimal. This created a huge chasm between potential and real threats to national security, with one justifying an apparatus of enormous dimensions, the other one of a much more modest size. A necessary consequence of that was a gigantic waste of resources and money, despite constant efforts to cut costs. As intelligence organisations do everywhere, Hungary's surveillance apparatus fabricated and exaggerated threats to demonstrate their importance and defend their budgets.

An absurdly typical example of the conflicts this created was the story of how the network was built up inside the Red Star Tractor Factory in Kispest (Tabajdi and Ungváry, pp. 204–213). For a long time an immense Ministry apparatus idled away at the factory, but it was unable to detect a sign of even the most microscopic irregularity to act as a pretext for the endless stream of documents that were being churned out:

In 1962, the scrawling of the Kossuth national coat of arms of 1848–49 and a graffito referring to October 23rd on a wall in the toilet set in motion an investigation... once again thorough plans of action were worked up, but the investigation likewise bore no fruit. Still, it was enough to keep them busy for years on end with the activities of hostile elements, even though one can discern from the summaries that the number of unusual events had meanwhile dropped to zero. (Tabajdi and Ungváry, p. 209)

In 1961 there had been not even one, but the summary appraisal for 1962 asserted that in the factory there was still "a highly active centre of internal reactionary forces" (Tabajdi and Ungváry, p. 459). The only serious business that might have been stopped, and of course was not stopped, was the 1975 appearance in Berlin of Miklós Haraszti's *Darabbér* (published in English translation a few years later as *A Worker in a Worker's State: Piece-Rates in Hungary*), an early and highly influential samizdat work, the material for which the author had collected mainly while he was working as a semi-skilled labourer in that very factory.



János Rainer's book deals with the intensive activities that were engaged by the secret police, from 1956 right up until the change of regime, directed at József Antall. (Antall was later to be leader of the winning party—Hungarian Democratic Forum, MDF—in the country's general election of 1990 and hence prime minister of the first post-Communist government.) This was in spite of the fact that such attention could only be said to have made any "sense" up until roughly 1959, which is when the young Antall, then a charismatic teacher at the Toldy *Gimnázium* in Budapest, was in a position to "infect" the pupils and the teaching staff with his gestures of resistance. By the end of 1959 it had been settled that his father's internationally recognised merits and highly positioned contacts were strong enough to save Antall himself from being arrested, though they were not sufficient for him to be allowed to stay in his teacher's job in such close proximity to corruptible young people.\*

The efforts to recruit or incriminate them on the part of the security services, with both father and son, were to no avail, but a satisfactory, long-lasting and stable *modus vivendi* acceptable to both parties could be established, meeting their respective needs for safety. That safety rested on the premise that both father and son knew where the regime drew the limits of toleration. In private life Antall was able freely to expound his anti-dictatorship views, but he just as consistently refrained from voicing these to the alternative public of active oppositionists as he did from demonstrations of support for the regime, restricting his public activities to the politically neutral ground of his job, after he had accepted a post in the regime's public service as director of the Museum of Medical History. Thus peaceful co-existence was under no threat until the Communist regime collapsed, a collapse which Antall had nothing to do with.

In short, the Antalls kept to certain rules of the game, but in spite of that

almost thirty persons in the informer network busied themselves around both Antall Snr and Jnr from 1957 until the early 1980s, among them at least 24 agents... The said 24 persons in the informer network wrote a total of almost 480 reports about the Antalls, who in their turn did not suffer any direct, demonstrable disadvantage attributable to informer activity as a result of the confidential investigations that were pursued against them... the duration, taken together with the 'results', of the informer activity against the Antalls throws a certain light on the thoroughness and efficiency of secret-service work in the Kádár era... Essentially nothing was done with any of the information brought to light by the group that was mobilised around them. (Rainer, p. 77)

\* ■ József Antall Snr played a part in the Independent Smallholders' Party before the Second World War, acting as a link between opposition politicians and Anglo-Saxon sympathisers in circles round Horthy. After the outbreak of the war he became Government Commissioner for Refugees, as such helping individuals without regard for religion or racial background, whether they were Polish refugees, Allied prisoners of war, Jews in hiding or German children who had been bombed out of their home. He resigned that post the moment that Germany invaded Hungary in March 1944, and due to his widely known oppositionist stance he was held in detention by the Gestapo.



Altogether, over a period of three decades, around one hundred secret-police officers were involved at some time or other with the network of informers that was put in place around the Antalls. Rainer is very careful in his choice of words when he writes of "direct, demonstrable disadvantage attributable to informer activity", because it was of course a disadvantage in itself that this family was obliged to live most of its life under the eyes of the secret police, and that two men who are cut out to be politicians both lost thirty years from their political careers. However, none of this was directly due to informer activity but rather to the regime that propped up that informer activity and was in turn propped up by it.

In the spring of 1967 Antall is recorded as having said, in his accustomed day-dreaming mode, on a train steaming from Győr to Budapest, something along the lines that someone really ought to organise a "shadow government". That light-hearted idea is recorded in a report by György Kiss, his travelling companion and closest friend and, at the same time, the most diligent informer against him. The secret police, however, spent over three years, from then until 1970, "investigating" this "shadow government" idea. In 1968 there were days when half a dozen detectives tailed Antall around Budapest (Rainer, pp. 225–232). Similarly, in 1980 Pál Tar, then living in Paris and in his late forties and subsequently destined to become Hungarian ambassador to Washington under the Antall administration, dropped a remark that he would like to write a book about Hungary when he came to retire, and that his friends Antall and Kiss could help him with collecting material for it. Kiss reported even that; the secret police opened a separate file, and for a year and a half were furiously busy investigating the gathering of material that was never undertaken for a book that was never written (Rainer, pp. 68–69).

When Antall became prime minister and learned the truth about Kiss, the first thing he did was appoint Kiss, a person he could now reliably blackmail, to handle press and media relations in the Office of the Prime Minister. In order to take over the national daily *Magyar Nemzet* he put another friend, József Horti, in charge. Horti in his turn had been the bravest of all in refusing to report on Antall, and during the bleakest year of the post-1956 reprisals threw back in the face of the female police captain who was attempting to recruit him that "he would accept any sanction, but he was unwilling to cooperate with the police's political department." As a result, Horti indeed lost his job and was placed under police surveillance (Rainer, pp. 131–132).

The reports written about József Antall Snr by an agent with the cover name of Budai, one Tivadar Pártay, who had been a leading politician in the Smallholders' Party, were particularly malicious. Pártay was at one and the same time an agent of the dictatorship, a target for them, a collaborator and an opponent. He informed on rivals within the party, but meanwhile preserved his image as being a politician of views that were markedly divergent from those of



the Communists. He was imprisoned and after his release kept under close surveillance, so when he tried to re-activate his political career and sought contacts with émigré Smallholders (via an agent provocateur who was assigned to him, of course), the secret service renewed its relationship with him (Rainer, pp. 80–84). Pártay strove to portray himself to the Kádár apparatchiks as the cleanest of the Smallholder politicians and the most suitable to work with others, with Antall Snr being just one of more than a few whom he blackened, but he also sought to find favours with Antall Jnr after 1989–90. (When a scandal threatened to bring down the whole government coalition that Antall was heading, Pártay, with secret assistance from the prime minister, founded the Historical Independent Smallholders' Party on the grounds that "there was a need for a Smallholder party that stuck firmly by the coalition.")

There were some fascinating psychological relationships among the admirers and traitors who teemed round Antall Jr. Gyula Mikus, for instance, "admired Antall, but his unsparingly detailed and intentionally highly damaging reports also testify to a suppressed hatred" (Rainer, p. 133). Mikus's respect for Antall perhaps derived from the latter being able to maintain his political identity and personal integrity after the 1956 revolution. Since Mikus had not been able to do so, his self-hatred might have driven him to hatred for Antall. He was able to give vent only via his reports as the role given him by the secret service specified he should be in awe of Antall.

Antall thought himself an expert at guarding against the attentions of the secret service. There is a record of this because he told that to one of his pupils. The pupil in question, Ferenc Huszár, reported it, being himself one of the informers who were to be guarded against (Rainer, p. 116). To make matters worse, Antall himself had earlier suspected Huszár of being precisely that, which we know because he shared that suspicion with another informer, the aforementioned Gyula Mikus, about whom he had no such suspicions (Rainer, pp. 115–116).

Antall intrigued his recruited pupil too, who seemingly did not think of him as pitifully gullible for choosing to instruct Huszár, of all people, in how to recognise a grass. Based on the latter's reports, Rainer sketches the image that Huszár formed of Antall in the following manner:

There was something grandiose, demanding of respect, in Antall's comprehension, his resolve, his tactical sense, his professional routine, even in his (ultimately, of course, futile) skirmishing with the secret service. A worthy opponent, at times genuinely enthralling, and one who, for that very reason, it was worth duping, worming one's way into his confidence, taking up the fight alongside. (Rainer, p. 118)

The enthralled young man indeed proved unable to detach himself from the fight with enemies of the regime, and he served for his entire professional life, up until the change in regime, as a secret-service officer.



The anthropologist István Kiszely served the secret service for even longer, over four decades, and was one of the most effective of agents involved in the brutal anti-Church measures during the sixties and seventies. Around 1,500 pages of reports, together with covert tape recordings and photographs, are evidence of how enthusiastically he assisted the operations run by organs of the service. In one pamphlet drafted by him he urged total eradication of the Church's network in Hungary. While he single-mindedly made use of the Ministry's support to build up his own livelihood and scholarly career, he lent a hand in the denigration of more than one Catholic priest and played a big part in the imprisonment of Frigyes Hagemann, a former Benedictine fellow-student. When the Antall administration took office, he joined Hungarian Television to boost their foreign news department and to serve later as deputy mayor for the First District of Budapest. To this day he is treated by the right-wing fringe as some sort of victim of communism, and he even has a report on his vetting which declares that he had no dealings with the secret service. He in turn regularly besmirches his professional opponents as being Communist hirelings and informers. (Tabajdi and Ungváry, pp. 214–227). Another who played a role resembling Kiszely's in the campaign against Frigyes Hagemann was János Tudós Takács, who operated under the codename "Sándor". Since the changeover, he has been on the staff of Pannon Front, a right-extremist weekly, has been a speaker at meetings of the infamous 'Blood and Honour' Cultural Club and was translator of pseudo-historian David Irving. Even as recently as 2004 he was listed in an article published by the Catholic weekly *Új Ember* as being among the victims of the Communist persecution of the Church. (Tabajdi and Ungváry, p. 478)

Pál Szalai, once a prominent dissident, had this to say when contemplating the case of a friend who had informed on him for decades on end only to become a rabid Hitlerite in his senility: "One wonders if my friend's turning fascist had anything to do with that none too splendid career. I don't know. It may well be that such enforced schizophrenia pervades the whole soul, and one day has to come out." ❧



Zoltán Farkas

## Did We See It Come?

*A jelen a jövő múltja. Járatlan utak—járt úttalanságok* (The Present is the Future's Past: Untravelled Highways—Travelled Byways).

László Muraközy, ed. Budapest: Akadémiai, 2009, 380 pp.

CLOSE-UP

If economics had its own calendar like the Chinese, the year starting in September 2008 would surely earn the epithet 'Year of the Tsunami'. After the collapse of Lehman Brothers a ruinous storm swept through the world's major economic regions. Not even the most clued-up, among them the former Chairman of the U.S. Federal Reserve Alan Greenspan and European Union officials surrounding Commission President José Manuel Barroso, had spotted any of the signs six months beforehand. A global cleanup has been under way ever since with doubtful results.

Events conspired to severely challenge members of the economic policy roundtable gathered around Professor László Muraközy, head of the Debrecen University economics faculty. In March 2008 its participants stepped into the public light, and a few months later their conference submissions were compiled into a text which was finalised during the weeks of the Lehman crisis with the book being published in May 2009. A race was on with real events. Little else could be done, given the conference and follow-up book had such an ambitious title: *The Present is the Future's Past*. The subtitle *Untravelled Highways—Travelled Byways* only raised the stakes higher in light of what was to follow.

The roundtable, formed in the spring of 2007, was an unusual setup. Its very existence and coherence contradicted the cliché that wherever two Hungarians get together three different opinions are formed. It was the brainchild of Professor Muraközy, who wanted to improve standards at the Debrecen economics faculty where he was department head from 1989 to 2008. The roundtable's leading figure was the late László Antal, a renowned economic reformist, something of a one-man band who took on government roles in

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critical times as an advisor to the Németh government in 1989–1990 and a member of the team of Finance Minister Lajos Bokros and central bank governor György Surányi during the 1995 stabilisation. Bokros, who has given the impression of the lone wolf of economic reform ever since, swept up to the table with two other academics, László Csaba, the internationally renowned expert on economic systems and transformations, and Ádám Török, who made a name for himself with research into competitiveness and technology policy. Dóra Győrffy, the youngest participant, is a senior lecturer at Debrecen University. Over the past few years she has published work with an original approach and insights on such topics as successful European stabilisations, fiscal discipline and the public confidence needed for government decisions to gain acceptance. Júlia Király, an expert on monetary policy, joined last year. An inspiring teacher, she was one of the founders of Eastern Europe's first International Training Centre for Bankers, has been its chief executive since 1999 and Vice President of the National Bank of Hungary since July 2007. Many members of the roundtable openly identify with the left while others are of a conservative bend. Their joint efforts, however, produced two volumes\* betraying no trace of political bias. The individual studies build on one another, and every line of thought follows seamlessly, while the text nicely shapes into a coherent whole.

The conference underpinning the book was held at a time probing politicians and economists in equal measure: five days after the referendum of March 2008, when three million voters in Hungary said no to the introduction of hospital co-payments and higher education tuition fees. The rejection of these symbolic decisions taken by Ferenc Gyurcsány's government had caused even the feeblest of fiscal reforms to disintegrate, and the prime minister resigned just a year later. Since 2006, the coalition of the Socialists and the Free Democrats had already made efforts to prevent the further growth of the huge general government debt accumulated over the previous cycle between 2002 and 2006 and to swiftly reduce the general government deficit, the period being bookended by shortfalls of 10 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP). Even in the intervening years the deficit was too big for sustainable growth. The government also tried to meet recommendations under the European Commission's excessive deficit procedure under way since 2004. The first signs of fiscal stabilisation came in spring 2008 along with the side effect of slowing economic growth and falling living standards. Reforms in support of long-term balance shrivelled before withering away altogether as the government sought a series of compromises.

\* ■ The first volume was published under the title *Fecseg a felszín, hallgat a mély* [The Silent Depths Reply to Surface Babble] in 2007.



**A**ntal told the conference that “the government has to overcome hardships which it has brought upon itself”. He was pointing to the mistakes made by the Socialist-liberal coalition during its previous four-year term and corrective measures attempted since. Bokros, commenting on the dismal outcome of the referendum noted that “It is a parody of social solidarity that pensioners have voted against tuition fees, students against health-care co-payments; and now everyone is happy that no one has to pay.” The main question by that time was whether an exit from this state of affairs existed, and, if there was, what direction it should take.

Antal, with a reputation of being virtually infallible in his assessments, told the conference in 2008 that the Hungarian economy’s potential growth rate was slowing with a great risk of halting altogether—or even slipping into recession—and this could be accompanied by galloping inflation. He could not have foreseen the fiscal tsunami bursting into Hungary half a year later, wiping out the government’s projections for modest growth or that the contraction of GDP would be of 6–7 per cent in 2009. Another of his reflections, however, would prove prophesy: budgetary adjustments begun in 2006, while indeed improving the balance, could not be regarded as successful because they had failed to bring about a significant reduction in state redistribution. Hence, economic growth was held back rather than speeded up as it had been in countries where successful stabilisation had taken place. A year later, already under pressure by the crisis, the government of Prime Minister Gordon Bajnai cut state expenditure by at least 1,000 billion forints in 2009 and 2010, which Gyurcsány had not ventured to do (a few weeks later he also resigned as leader of the Socialist Party). Bajnai’s austerity measures have been pro-cyclical in that they aim to stimulate the economy as the crisis simmers down instead of continuing to hobble along as it had done before the crisis.

Antal identified the following state of affairs as the reason for the slowdown: a bulging state, taxes and contributions on labour horrendously high by European standards and an exceptionally low tax on capital gains. Changing the tax system in itself was not an instant fix, he said, no matter how many wanted to give that impression: if budgetary processes were not successfully kept under control tax reform would not produce the calculated results. By this spring the government no longer had time to contemplate things. It administered a cut in taxes and contributions of about the same size as that advocated by experts, while at the same time raising value-added and excise taxes in order to balance the budget. And with a makeshift plan it cannonballed the introduction of a wealth tax. Leaders of the opposition Fidesz—Hungarian Civic Union immediately declared they would scrap it once in power.

“Most new European Union members have the whiff of political instability about them, but in no country does this stifle the economy as much as it does in Hungary,” Antal fulminated at the conference, describing the chaos as



characteristic of political and economic public discourse. The proliferation of panaceas was “the great national pastime”. He added in his closing remarks: “Time does not work in favour of sustainability, except insofar as it quickens the realisation of the inevitability of change”. However, time has worked in favour of change, which the crisis has proven inevitable. Although the transformation of big budgetary distribution systems—e.g. education, social insurance and the introduction of partial fee payments for services earlier considered to be free but in reality financed from taxes (in other words co-financing)—was taken off the agenda after the referendum, the Bajnai government which came into office in spring 2009 took an axe to welfare spending. Some welfare payments and public-sector wages were frozen and adjustments were made to the pension system. By swiftly announcing a raise of the retirement age and changes to the mechanism applied in calculating pension rises, the measures have somewhat eased the social insurance budget of the next few years in line with EU recommendations. But the systemic reforms championed by Bokros have stalled.

**T**he general government debt is large and economic policy is mortgaging the future, Bokros said in his lecture and contribution to the book. Indeed, the structure of the budget in itself has become an obstacle to long-term growth, he claimed. Put into the context of the history of the emerging regime-changing state, Muraközy characterised the direction of change in transforming societies as moving from the state towards the market: “It is not the market that shapes the state [in transforming societies], as is the case in the organic growth of developed countries, but the other way around; the state shapes and creates the market, in some sense adjusting it to itself.” The Bajnai government’s measures, coupled with spending cuts administered under the flag of crisis management, might just help to fend off the total collapse of the budget. Indeed, the deficit expected this year and for 2010 will be a modest one by European standards. For Bokros, however, this is not good enough. A critical mass of reforms is needed to kick-start growth. In Hungary, public goods and services are financed by taxes and contributions, not at the place and time of consumption and not in proportion to the quantity or quality of services used; this results in a permanent excess demand and an unpreventable slippage of the standard of services, Bokros argued. This has since been proven to a tee: the payment for visits to the doctor introduced at about one euro per visit temporarily reduced the number of doctor-patient consultations. But since the fee was scrapped after the referendum, the number of consultations has risen and the hard-earned stability of the state health insurance system is again under threat. This is really due to the lack of a connection between paid social security contributions and the services and payments received either in health care or in the pension system. It is these



kinds of reforms, a "regime change in budgetary policy" that Bokros has been urging and envisioning for nearly 15 years.

"The scrapping of higher education fees is especially painful," he said in his lecture, adding that the people who voted for this were mainly those who would never have been or will be admitted into higher education. Some of the Gyurcsány government's reforms targeting public education—somewhat following Bokros's recipe—also met with political resistance. The merger of small schools, modernisation, and the raising of the hours that had to be taught by every teacher were all met with a blaze of fire from interest groups and the opposition. "If the school is moved or closed, the village will wither away," Bokros admitted in his study, but added that the social goal is more important: that every member of the next generations should have access to high-quality public education. "Reforms can only be implemented where economic policy is based on real partnership," said Antal, summarising the reasons for failure. Gyórfy added that without credible governance there is no chance for reform. And given the lack thereof, the government's efforts have been more harmful than useful.

When accepting reforms ordinary people make short-term sacrifices for a more favourable position in the long run, but if they do not believe the political promises they will not be willing, Gyórfy said, who in her contribution gave an overview of the budgetary cycles of Hungarian economic policy: all governments since 1994 have produced the highest deficits in election years. The reason, she explained, was that governments tend to win votes by dishing out election goodies in times of low confidence; the public is unaware of the dangers of overspending whereas the political elite is not willing to exercise self-restraint. This means that institutions and rules to control budgetary policy are not created and no external force is present to enforce fiscal rigour (this is to change in the autumn of 2009). This lack of trust, or more precisely a "vote-winning economic policy," inevitably leads to a big deficit and imbalance. Whereas this can work to increase the pressure for reform, in an atmosphere of no confidence budgetary adjustment is carried out through tax increases rather than spending cuts coupled with reforms which would ease the burden of the state. Thus a low level of employment remains, growth slows down, which in turn leads to yet greater imbalance and the renewal of distrust, she said, describing the vicious cycle that has been characteristic of Hungary.

It cannot be disputed that outside pressure has been brought to bear on fiscal policy throughout Hungary's post-transformation period. The Socialist government of Gyula Horn was pressured into accepting the Bokros-Surányi stabilisation package during the Latin-American crisis in 1995 in order to avoid economic meltdown. The centre-right Orbán government was frugal under the clouds of the Asian and Russian crises of 1998 and 1999, respectively; but as the international climate brightened it promptly eased its fiscal policy. After the 2002



elections, an international financial boom gave the Socialist Prime Minister Péter Medgyessy and his successor Ferenc Gyurcsány the means to go on a spending spree. Following his 2006 election victory, Gyurcsány, heeding pressures from the European Union's excessive budget deficit procedure, pledged to reduce a double-digit general government deficit to below 3 per cent within three years. Then in the autumn of 2008, pressured by the global financial crisis, he was forced to tighten the belt even more. However, since the recession turned out to be worse than could be foreseen at the time, he left further austerity moves to his successor, the more radical Gordon Bajnai. Gyurcsány had already drawn up the new economic policy framework between November 2008 and March 2009 together with EU and International Monetary Fund experts in response to the financial crisis to avert the country's impending bankruptcy.

A vote-mongering economic policy is not unique to Hungary. In his lecture in Debrecen, Csaba discussed the Baltic States and the Balkans and called attention to the emergence of a "new kind of populism". It is characterised by an uncritical servicing of voters' demands, irrespective of consequences. His diagnosis on the Baltic States and the Balkans, claiming their growth increasingly showed signs of being unsustainable, has proven famously true over the past year. And let's not forget that, at the time, domestic circles watched the rocketing growth of Estonia or Romania with envy. In these new EU member states fast economic growth had been fuelled by internal consumption, growth had become a value in itself, politics failed to calm the overheated economy, and the hands of monetary policy were tied by the fact that the national currencies had been pegged to the euro, said Csaba, listing the growing number of dangers, adding that these small and open economies would pay a high price for a policy which maximised growth and minimised taxes. "We could argue about who should pay the ferryman, but it is not a question that the ferryman must be paid," Csaba argued concluding: "Reducing economic policy to a few simple rules and neglecting more complex tasks could only bring short-term results and that's exactly what it did bring." At the time the book went to press statistical data already showed that the engine of these over-spinning economies was grinding to a halt. Since then, it has also come to light that some of the Baltic states which produced two-digit growth two years ago are facing two-digit contractions in 2009.

**T**ime really tested the views of Júlia Király the most. In her lecture, the central bank's vice president gave a rundown with utmost professional confidence of the breakout of the subprime crisis in the United States in 2007 and the way it had spread onto the banking system, leading to a drying up of financial markets. In response to a question about whether this would end in a crash or a soft landing, she clearly responded: "a long crash landing." However, she did add that all this would make "little direct impact" on Hungary—although she



gave a precise list of all the potential indirect effects: spiralling disruptions on the government securities and money markets, the liquidity squeeze, the rise in surcharges, an increase in banks' funding costs.

It would be churlish, knowing the facts, to chide Ms Király in retrospect about why she failed to see in its entirety the impacts of the credit crunch spreading to Hungary's real economy. Let us not forget that the collapse of Lehman Brothers and then the state bailout for the insurance giant AIG occurred only six months later. And even in early October, following those events, the EU's leading politicians were sending soothing messages about Europe not getting such a shock as the United States. What is more, at the end of the year, analysis by international organisations still claimed that emerging Europe would survive the crisis smoothly, though Hungary had already been up to its neck in it, and they only changed their tune in the first months of this year. By then it was absolutely clear that this region would be hit the worst.

The tornado of the September 15 collapse of Lehman Brothers swept through Budapest's markets around October 10: stock market prices crashed in two days, the government securities market froze up, the interbank market dried up. Hungarian economists and policy makers have never had such an experience, nor could they ever have had one. "Liquidity did not squeeze; it disappeared. The world of investors was demolished by the panicky flight," wrote Király in a chapter added to the last in the volume, describing the post-Lehman period. Governments in developed countries immediately assembled bank bailout and stimulus packages worth 5–50 per cent of GDP. "They opened umbrellas over their heads." But they left the financial systems of countries in their surroundings unprotected, Király said, probably relating personal experience. Witnessing the vulnerability and lack of protection—in which, as we have seen, earlier economic policy mistakes also played a part—investors began to flee as fast as they could. Hungary was among the first to become a target of speculation on the forint's weakening and falling stock prices. Swift intervention by the European Union and the International Monetary Fund somewhat eased the situation, which was threatening a meltdown. In this respect, Hungarian central-bank and financial leaders were pioneering: after the collapse of Iceland, they put aside all worries and immediately alerted the leaders of international organisations, among them the directors of the International Monetary Fund, and with a swift agreement created a model for other similarly vulnerable states.

In the second half of October firm joint action by the government and the central bank—modifying the fiscal programme, significant market-building steps, a radical rise of the base rate to stabilise the forint—as well as a stability loan package compiled jointly by the International Monetary Fund and the European Commission, have proven effective. At the start of November 2008 the crisis was appearing to ease. We have relieved Belgrade, but we should, for



the first time in history, try not to lose the battle of Mohács," said Júlia Király with a sigh, in reference to the relief of the Turkish siege of Belgrade in July 1456 followed by the Mohács disaster in 1526, which led to 150 years of Turkish rule. We might well add that it is not the battle but the war which must be won, and not without reason: after the book went to press in March 2009 another speculative attack swept through emerging-integrating European countries, not sparing the forint either. But by then the international rescue loan had made its impact. In the period since, the international climate has gradually improved, and, taking advantage of this, Hungary's forint-denominated government bond issues restarted in April; in mid-July, foreign investors signed 1 billion euros worth of euro bonds issued by the Government Debt Management Centre. After a break of one year, hopes have sparked for the first time that Hungary can be financed by the international money markets and not just by loans by international organisations.

Hungary's recent successful euro bond issue goes to show that investors acknowledge the Hungarian government's willingness to administer spending cuts of a magnitude that the governments of developed countries have shunned in succession, instead allowing their general government deficits and general government debt to jump stratospherically. Its earlier "sins" prevent Hungarian economic policy from choosing that path.

But whether this will suffice to win the war has yet to be seen. 🐼

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Alan Walker

# From Alpha to Omega

## Hans von Bülow: A Life

From Alpha to Omega, he is Music personified.

—Franz Liszt<sup>1</sup>

In Art there are no trivial things.

—Bülow<sup>2</sup>

**H**ans von Bülow once arrived in a small German town to give a piano recital. He was informed by the somewhat nervous organizers that the local music critic could usually be counted on to give a good review, provided that the artist first agreed to take a modestly priced lesson from him. Bülow pondered this unusual situation for a moment, and then replied, "He charges such low fees he could almost be described as incorruptible". On another occasion Bülow got back to his London hotel after dark. As he was climbing the dimly lit staircase, he collided with a stranger hurrying in the opposite direction. "Donkey!" exclaimed the man angrily. Bülow raised his hat politely, and replied, "Hans von Bülow"<sup>3</sup>

Volumes could be filled with the wit and wisdom of Hans von Bülow, and the biography that follows teems with examples. His banter was woven into the very weft and weave of his complex personality. He had, moreover, the enviable gift of instant retort. A gentleman eager to be seen in his company once observed Bülow taking a morning stroll. He overtook the great musician,

1 ■ WLLM, p. 397.

2 ■ *Weimarische Zeitung*, issue of December 16, 1880.

3 ■ These and other Bülow anecdotes have come down to us in a variety of forms and from a variety of sources. The main ones will be found in BBLW, pp. 276–91; and BA, pp. 210–14.

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### Alan Walker

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but was unsure of how to introduce himself. Finally he thought of something to say. "I'll bet you don't remember who I am." "You just won your bet", replied Bülow, and walked on. Equally withering were Bülow's observations on the follies of everyday life. Having heard that an eligible young bachelor wanted to improve his social station through marriage, he observed, "It will never work. The young lady wants to do the same thing".

On orchestral players Bülow could be particularly hard, especially if he felt that they were incompetent. He once berated a trombone player who was failing to deliver the right kind of sound, and told him that his tone resembled roast beef gravy running through a sewer. In Italy, during a rehearsal of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, Bülow found himself confronted by a timpanist who simply could not master the intricate rhythms of the Scherzo. There comes a moment in this dynamic movement when the timpanist must break through with force, hammering out the basic rhythm of the main theme. Bülow strove with might and main to pound the pattern into the poor man's head, but to no avail. Suddenly the solution occurred to him. *Timp-a-ni! Timp-a-ni! Timp-a-ni!* he kept yelling. A smile of comprehension slowly dawned on the player's face, as he caught the rhythm of the one word with which he was familiar, and in no time at all he was playing the passage in the correct manner.<sup>4</sup>



Bülow could also be severe on fledgling composers, particularly if he suspected that they wanted him to endorse their music. During a visit to Boston, in the spring of 1889, a local composer of modest talent sent Bülow one of his compositions and was bold enough to request an opinion. The piece was titled "O Lord, hear my prayer!" Bülow glanced briefly at the manuscript and wrote beneath the title, "He may, if you stop sinning like this!"<sup>5</sup>

A more famous case was that of Friedrich Nietzsche who, in the summer of 1872, was indiscreet enough to send Bülow an ambitious orchestral composition of his own—a "Manfred Meditation"—for the conductor's critical appraisal. It was one of the philosopher's major blunders. He had witnessed Bülow conduct *Tristan* at the Munich Royal Opera House a few weeks earlier, and by way of thanking him for "the loftiest artistic experience of my life" he had sent Bülow a copy of his newly published *The Birth of Tragedy*. When he

4 ■ DMML, pp. 83–84. This concert took place in Milan, on December 4, 1870, as part of the city's Beethoven centennial festival.

5 ■ *Boston Evening Transcript*, April 1, 1890, referring to Bülow's visit of the previous year.



heard that Bülow was sufficiently impressed with the book to carry it with him everywhere, he was emboldened to send him his "Manfred Meditation", doubtless hoping that the famous conductor would favour him with the usual assortment of platitudes that professionals are sometimes apt to offer distinguished amateurs. If Nietzsche thought to secure some fine phrases from Bülow, proffered by virtue of who he was, rather than by virtue of what the music itself was worth, he was sadly mistaken. Bülow looked at the "Manfred Meditation" and knew that he must do his duty. He told Nietzsche that his score was "the most unedifying, the most anti-musical thing that I have come across for a long time in the way of notes put on paper." Several times, Bülow went on, he had to ask himself if it were not some awful joke. Having inserted the blade, Bülow now twisted the hilt and used Nietzsche's own philosophical precepts against him. "Of the Apollonian element I have not been able to discover the smallest trace; and as for the Dionysian, I must say frankly that I have been reminded less of this than of the 'day after' a bacchanal." In brief, Nietzsche's score had produced in Bülow a hangover.<sup>6</sup>

*Schadenfreude*, too, was never far from the surface, for like most of us Bülow found occasional joy in the misfortune of others. Two of his orchestral players, named Schulz and Schmidt, were slowly driving him to distraction because of their evident inability to understand what he required of them. One morning he got to the rehearsal only to be met with the sad news that Schmidt had died during the night. "And Schulz?" he inquired.

It would demean Bülow to be remembered by such anecdotes alone. He strode across the world of nineteenth-century music like a colossus. Bülow was music's great reformer. He set out to make a difference. His career, as we shall see, was epoch making, and it unfolded in at least six directions simultaneously. He was a renowned concert pianist; a virtuoso orchestral conductor; a respected (and sometimes feared) teacher; an influential editor of works by Bach, Mendelssohn, Chopin, and above all of Beethoven, in the performance of whose music he had no rival; a scourge as a music critic, whose articles resembled the spraying of anti-septic on bacteria; and last, he was a composer whose music, while it is hardly played today, deserves a better fate than benign neglect. The tales with which his life has become encumbered can easily divert attention from his real achievements. When Bülow's second wife, the Meiningen actress Marie Schanzer, was invited to provide some recollections about her late husband for the influential journal *Die Musik*,<sup>7</sup> some sixteen years after his death, she at first declined, and for rather similar reasons. She knew what the world wanted to read, and instinctively realized that Bülow the jester and provocateur, however entertaining these aspects of his personality might be to the general reader, must not obscure a musical legacy that was possibly unique.

6 ■ Bülow's devastating critique may be consulted in full in BB, vol. 4, pp. 552–554.

7 ■ Issue of January 1910/11, Heft 7, pp. 210–212.



**H**ans von Bülow's stature first impressed itself upon me while I was writing my three-volume biography of Franz Liszt. There, of course, he inevitably played a supporting role, first as Liszt's most gifted piano pupil, and later as his son-in-law, the husband of Liszt's daughter Cosima. Bülow's life touched on Liszt's at a hundred different points, and it is hardly possible to tell the one story without reference to the other. Nonetheless, Bülow must needs remain on the sidelines as far as the story of Liszt's life is concerned. In the standard biographies of Richard Wagner his position is marginalised still further. Bülow dutifully enters Wagner's life just in time to help propel the composer onto the international stage by conducting unforgettable world premières in Munich of *Tristan* (1865) and *Die Meistersinger* (1868). Meanwhile, as the whole world knows and is weary of being reminded, Wagner seduces Cosima, impregnates her with three of his children while she is still Bülow's wife, and encourages her to leave hearth and home to join him in Switzerland. Bülow then obligingly disappears from view, his mission accomplished. Yet this most musical of musicians went on to enjoy a remarkable career, quite independent of those of Liszt and Wagner, from both of whom he broke free.

It has been well said that we burn a page of history even as we read it. To Hans von Bülow that observation applies with peculiar force. So much that was once known and admired about him has been forgotten, his narrative consigned to the ashes of the past. Until now there has never been a full-scale biography of Bülow in English. The present book not only fills the void, but presents much that is new.

If we had to find a single phrase to sum up Bülow's exceptional career it would surely be "The pursuit of excellence". All his joys and all his sorrows flowed from this primary goal. Excellence achieved was a day of rejoicing. Excellence denied was a day of sorrow and even of retribution, both for himself and for others. He knew that in order to better the future he must disturb the present. That disturbance forms one of the more graphic aspects of his story.

We remarked that Bülow's career unfolded in several directions simultaneously. Let us review them here before turning to the main narrative.

**B**ülow came to be regarded as the greatest classical pianist of his time, renowned for his fidelity to the score. His creed was never in doubt. The role of the performer was to be the servant of the composer, not his master. Today such a view is commonplace, but it was not commonplace in Bülow's time. Bach and Beethoven dominated his repertoire, but he also played a lot of music by Chopin, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Liszt, and in later years much



Brahms.<sup>8</sup> When Bülow confronted a musical masterpiece he believed that he was in the presence of greatness. And he expected his listeners to share his sense of reverence. When they did not, he chastised them. Like the prophets of old, the interpreter was a chosen one, there to be ushered into the presence of God in order to take back the Word to the people. Nor is the biblical analogy inappropriate, for Bülow himself was always making them. His aphorism "In the beginning was rhythm" is an obvious modification of the opening verse of the book of Genesis. He once described Bach's 48 Preludes and Fugues as the Old Testament of music, and Beethoven's 32 Piano Sonatas as the New. To which observation he added, "We must believe in both".<sup>9</sup> And in an interview that he gave to *The Etude*, he observed, "I believe in Bach the father, Beethoven the son, and in Brahms the holy ghost of music".<sup>10</sup> The abandon and excess that sometimes characterised the playing of his great rival Anton Rubinstein, with its self-indulgent departures from the text, was for him a form of blasphemy—as if the Bible itself was being used to justify a personal opinion. He believed that no performance could be as perfect as the work it interpreted. For the performer, Parnassus must always be just beyond reach.

The only two pianists in the second half of the nineteenth century with whom Bülow could be compared were Carl Tausig and Anton Rubinstein. (Liszt had retired from the concert platform in 1847, at the height of his powers.) Tausig died young, and Bülow's fine obituary notice of the Polish virtuoso testifies to the high regard in which he held him. A year before Tausig's demise, in fact, Bülow heard him perform privately in Berlin and was stunned. He confided to his Italian pupil Giuseppe Buonamici, "Tausig is surely the greatest pianist in the world—he has attained the most ideal perfection that I ever imagined".<sup>11</sup> Rubinstein falls into a different category. He was seen as Bülow's great contender, his nemesis even, and comparisons were constantly being made between them. Their performing styles, to say nothing of their platform personalities, were quite dissimilar. Rubinstein ambled onto the platform like a great bear. Bülow appeared on stage rapidly, "like someone afraid that the bank will close before he can make his deposit".<sup>12</sup> Bülow complained that "Rubinstein can make any number of errors during a performance and nobody is disturbed. If I make a single mistake, it will be noticed immediately by everyone in the audience, and the effect will be spoiled".<sup>13</sup> The observation was well founded. Rubinstein was described during his celebrated tour of America as a storm-king at the piano, riding the instrument as he would a war-charger. His errors in technique were

8 ■ The full extent of Bülow's vast repertoire, both as a pianist and as a conductor, may be seen in HMIB, pp. 458–515.

9 ■ BAS (part 2), p. 273.

10 ■ Issue of May 1889, p. 73.

11 ■ BC, unpublished letter dated June 26, 1870.

12 ■ *Chicago Times*, February 6, 1876.

13 ■ MMLL, p. 238.



concealed beneath a thunder of sound, or else atoned for by the superb eloquence of his expression. Bülow was exactly the opposite—a precise, careful, uncompromising, studious technician. He was the Swiss watchmaker of pianists. The jewelled perfection of his playing was a thing to behold. Everything was so tightly sprung that he could not afford to make an error.<sup>14</sup>

But the comparison runs deeper than that. Rubinstein and Bülow represented the twin archetypes of piano playing which remain with us today. They are best described as the “Dionysian” and the “Apollonian”.<sup>15</sup> It was said that unless one had heard Rubinstein, one could not appreciate Bülow; that unless one had heard Bülow, one could not esteem Rubinstein. The one served as a foil for the other. With Rubinstein the text was the starting point. It served as an entrance into

a world of imagination, in which the performance was borne aloft on the wings of fantasy, constrained only by the mood of the moment and the taste of the player. The electricity generated by Rubinstein’s recitals was partly due to the unexpected, which lay in wait for the audience (and possibly for Rubinstein, too) at every touch and turn.

For Bülow the unexpected was anathema. Such was his respect for the composer that his goal was to reproduce the text down to the smallest detail. He would have agreed with Stravinsky that to violate the letter was to violate the spirit. He once said, “Learn to read the score of a Beethoven symphony *accurately* first, and you will have found its interpretation”.<sup>16</sup> Bülow’s idea of perfection was to play with such clarity that if the performance were to be taken down from dictation the result would conform in every respect to the printed score. Since such an ideal is beyond the reach of most mortals, the pursuit of per-



Hans von Bülow in Hamburg.  
December 1886.

14 ■ Sir Alexander Mackenzie, who attended Bülow’s recitals in Scotland, made a similar distinction in his memoirs. “Rubinstein could at times behave like a whirlwind; Bülow impressed by a brilliant technique, but even more by the surgeon-like skill with which he laid bare the composer’s intentions...” MMN, p. 88.

15 ■ Dionysius and Apollo, the gods of fertility and intellectual organization, respectively, have often been invoked to describe the opposite sides of human nature. The one represents through his Bacchanalian revels the passionate side of humanity; the other represents the supreme authority in matters of intellectual organization, his notable interests being archery, medicine—and music.

16 ■ SRR, p. 121.



fection for Bülow consisted in reducing the distance, however short, that separated sight from sound. And he would have argued that his was by far the harder task, as indeed it was. By the very nature of the difficulty, in fact, Bülow knew that he could never rest content.

Eduard Dannreuther used the words “passionate intellectuality” to describe Bülow’s playing, and they have often been quoted. Others found it cold and devoid of imagination. Clara Schumann called it “wearisome”, disliking Bülow’s analytical approach to music that she herself played with distinction. During his fabled American tour of 1875–1876 the critic of *The Musical Trade Review* longed for a false note, such as Rubinstein and even Liszt were known to strike. But Bülow rarely obliged his audience with such a symptom of vulnerability. Seated at the piano his posture was restrained. He was memorably described by Richard Strauss, his acolyte and admirer, as “marble from the wrists up”. Bülow had small hands, and could hardly stretch beyond an octave—providing yet another instructive example to pianists that nimbleness and dexterity may yet compensate for a small grasp.<sup>17</sup>

Bülow’s ability to sight-read was also something to behold. He was completely at home when confronting a full orchestral score, replete with its transposing instruments and a medley of clefs spread across twenty staves or more. Wagner was amazed when he witnessed Bülow play *prima vista* from the pencil sketches of the composer’s still-unpublished opera *Siegfried*. He kept peering over Bülow’s shoulder, while Bülow, his eyes glued to the page, kept exclaiming “Colossal!” “Unique!” “Fit for the next century!”<sup>18</sup>

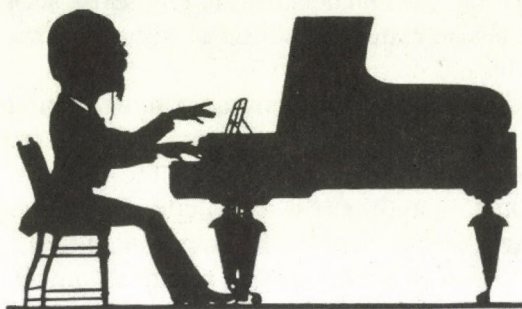
Bülow was one of the first pianists to devote an entire recital to one composer—Bach, Chopin, and above all Beethoven, whose last five sonatas were regularly presented by him during a single evening. Even more striking was the great Beethoven Cycle that he began to present in public around 1886, in which he played all the important sonatas and sets of variations, from the A major Sonata, op. 2, no. 2, right through to the *Diabelli* Variations, across four consecutive evenings. And everything was performed from memory, an important point to which we propose to return. Largely forgotten today is that Bülow was the first pianist to devote an entire recital to the music of Brahms. Such a proposal was at first considered dubious, even by Brahms, but Bülow overcame the opposition and achieved a conspicuous success. Bülow was the thinking man’s pianist and he came to prominence at a time when the concert platform stood in danger of being taken over by a generation of “light entertainers”—Leopold de Mayer, Louis Gottschalk, and (later) Vladimir de Pachmann among them—who laced their programmes with paraphrases of popular operas

17 ■ The casts of Bülow’s hands, made during his lifetime, are preserved in the Bülow archives of the Deutsche Staatsbibliothek.

18 ■ That was in August 1857, when Bülow and Cosima visited Wagner in Zurich. For Wagner’s account of the visit see WML, p. 669; also MCW(2), p. 29.



and potpourris of favourite melodies. With this sort of programme the mature Bülow would have nothing to do. The care that he took in creating his recitals and orchestral concerts, especially in his later years, is still a model that can be followed with profit today. He understood that a good programme, like a good



*Bülow at the piano. A silhouette by Hans Schliessmann.*

piece of music, is greater than the sum of its parts, that each piece could and should throw light on the others. In an age when many programmes lasted for three hours or more, and consisted in the main of a smorgasbord of pieces put together on a whim, Bülow's concerts became memorable for their musical logic. The individual pieces were like

members of one family, bound together by biography, history, genre, and sometimes by their key-schemes—golden threads that ran from one composition to the next.

Bülow's piano technique was obtained and kept up at great physical expense. It was nothing for him to practise for five or six hours a day while preparing for a concert tour. Bernard Boekelmann expressed it well when he pointed out that "at the piano Bülow was never free... his mental organization was inflexible... he was rigid in mind and body".<sup>19</sup> This stood in such marked contrast to the fire, dash and freedom of his conducting that it led many to say that the orchestra, not the piano, was his natural instrument.

#### IV

**B**ülow was, in fact, the first virtuoso conductor. It was his work with the Meiningen Court Orchestra, in the 1880s, that allowed him to claim this title. The story of how he took a small forty-eight-piece orchestra, and fashioned it in his own image, has entered the history books. That part of his narrative, at least, has not turned to ashes. At Meiningen, Bülow the conductor emerged as an extension of Bülow the pianist. After rigorously rehearsing the orchestra on a daily basis for three months, Bülow had the ensemble play all nine Beethoven symphonies from memory. He then took the orchestra on tour. The capital cities of Berlin and Vienna had never witnessed such discipline in

19 ■ BRAB, p. 502. Boekelmann, an admirer of Bülow, was a Dutch pianist and teacher who is chiefly remembered for his unique editions of Bach's 48 Preludes and Fugues and the Two-Part Inventions, in which he prints the different voices in contrasting colours, to indicate the part-writing, an idea worthy of Bülow himself.



an orchestra, and it made them look to their laurels. When the entire string section played Bülow's orchestral arrangement of Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge* from memory, standing up, audiences were astonished. But that was before ten of the violins returned to the stage and played Bach's unaccompanied Chaconne from memory, in unison. Bülow would doubtless have justified such radical demands by observing that he was not asking the players to accept anything that he himself was unwilling to do.<sup>20</sup>

Some of the best descriptions of Bülow at rehearsal we owe to Richard Strauss, who became Bülow's assistant conductor in Meiningen in 1884. "The gracefulness with which he handled the baton", wrote Strauss, "the charming manner in which he used to conduct his rehearsals—instruction frequently taking the form of a witty epigram—are unforgettable; when he suddenly turned away from the rostrum and put a question to the pupil reading the score, the latter had to answer quickly if he were not to be taunted with a sarcastic remark by the master in front of the assembled orchestra".<sup>21</sup>

Nor was Strauss alone in his admiration of Bülow. Conductors as diverse as Bruno Walter, Gustav Mahler and Walter Damrosch witnessed the passion and fire he could draw from an orchestra, and they wrote about it. So did other musicians, including composers Alexander Mackenzie, Charles Villiers Stanford, and above all Tchaikovsky—whose bold letter in support of Bülow deserves to be better known.<sup>22</sup> Felix Weingartner was deeply impressed when he first witnessed Bülow conducting the Meiningen Orchestra in Eisenach. Later he became one of Bülow's severest critics, accusing him of self-aggrandizement and of having done damage by creating "a lot of little Bülows", those aspiring conductors who aped the choreography of their hero while not possessing a sliver of his talent. "Sensation-mongering in music began with Bülow", Weingartner wrote caustically in his widely read treatise *On Conducting*.<sup>23</sup> These remarks, as we now know, were written in a spirit of revenge. They were calculated to damage Bülow, and we shall eventually come to understand that they arose from autobiographical considerations.<sup>24</sup>

20 ■ Bülow's reforms often caught the attention of the press. A typical article in the *Boston Musical Herald* informed its readers that "Hans von Bülow is continually making innovations on the customs of conductors. Not satisfied with requiring members of the orchestra perfectly to memorize their parts throughout, he is now training them so to observe marks of tempo and expression as to be able to play satisfactorily without the guidance of the conductor's baton." Issue of January 1885, p. 6.

21 ■ SRR, pp. 120–121.

22 ■ The Paris *Figaro*, issue of January 13, 1893. See also TLF, p. 529.

23 ■ WMC, pp. 22–23; and WBR, p. 163.

24 ■ Weingartner's observations had an unfortunate influence on both David Ewen (EMB) and Gunther Schuller (SCC), in their respective books on conductors and conducting. Both authors seem unaware that Weingartner held two irreconcilable opinions about Bülow, one before January 1887 and one afterwards. We propose to return to this crucial turning-point later in the narrative.



We may safely leave the last word with Liszt's pupil Frederic Lamond, who had also studied with Bülow and was intimately acquainted with the European scene from the 1880s up to World War II. "He was the greatest conductor who ever lived—not even Toscanini approaching him", Lamond wrote. "I have seen and heard them all. No one, Nikisch, Richter, Mahler, Weingartner, could compare with him in true warmth of expression, which is the soul and substance of all art".<sup>25</sup>

Bülow's appointment as artistic director of the recently formed Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, in 1887, garnered international acclaim both for him and for the city. Within five years he raised what was at that time a modest group of players in search of leadership to an ensemble of world stature. There were many ear-witnesses to what Bülow accomplished in Berlin, and we have devoted substantial portions of our narrative to those golden years. His Berlin audiences packed the old Philharmonie to capacity, for they understood that they were witnessing history. Bülow's public rehearsals, and his postconcert speeches, which were filled with the wittiest observations, sent everyone home in anticipation of the next concert. On the podium Bülow was a figure of enormous authority, bouncing with energy. His arm gestures were wide, and his baton described the most eloquent arcs, bringing the entire ensemble into its orbit. He was described as having "a singing baton". His body would sway back and forth as he attempted to capture that most elusive quality called *tempo rubato* (elusive, that is, to orchestras). Attending to the shape of every phrase, Bülow would dart here and there, piercing the players with his gaze and drawing from them music of deep intensity. His mental equipment for a conductor was complete. His ear was infallible, as was his memory, which had no boundary line.

Bülow's memory. All roads lead to this topic, and it would be negligent not to touch on it here. It was a gift of nature and had been his from childhood. He had the ability to imprint on his memory whole pages of a musical score that he had seen but once, and reproduce them at the piano. This has always been a rare possession, and there is probably no one in the profession of music today who can lay claim to it, which is why it provokes disbelief. Even Toscanini's well-known ability to recall orchestral scores in detail pales by comparison. Among the many anecdotes that have come down to us, one that can do duty for the others was recorded by Bülow's admirer, the Irish composer Charles Villiers Stanford.

During a concert tour of Britain, Stanford tells us, Bülow encountered the Irish composer George Osborne opposite Lamborn Cock's old music shop in Bond Street, London. Bülow remarked that he was about to leave for Brighton where he was to play a recital that same evening. "Of course, you are

25 ■ LM, p. 43.



going to play something of Sterndale Bennett's?" remarked Osborne. "Why?" queried Bülow. "Because it is his birthday", retorted Osborne. "I don't know anything of Bennett's," observed Bülow, "tell me something". "We are at his publisher's door", replied Osborne. "Come in and choose for yourself". After rummaging through various items, Bülow selected Bennett's *Three Musical Sketches*, op. 10: "The Lake", "The Mill Stream", and "The Fountain". He then left the shop, went to the railway station, and learnt them on the train journey from London to Brighton. That same evening he played them from memory.<sup>26</sup>

Whatever the score, and whatever its complexity, Bülow rarely had a note of music in front of him, not merely at the concerts but more impressively at the rehearsals as well. He usually knew better than the players what was on the printed page before them, and sometimes better than the composer too. He was once rehearsing an orchestral piece of Liszt, in Liszt's presence, when Liszt stopped him with the observation that a certain note should have been played *piano*. "No", replied Bülow, "it is *sforzando*". Liszt suggested that Bülow should look at the score, which was duly produced. It turned out that Bülow was right. The orchestra began to applaud and in all the excitement one of the brass players lost his place, creating further uncertainty. "Look for a B-flat in your part" said Bülow, who had once more thrown the score aside. "Five measures further on I wish to begin".<sup>27</sup>

One thing remains to be said, for it is the bane of orchestras everywhere. Few are the players who actually enjoy their work, who draw from it that spiritual satisfaction that lured them to music in the first place. From childhood they labour to conquer the technical difficulties posed by their instruments, and eventually learn to express their artistic selves through them, only to discover that the thing they have come to treasure most—their musical individuality—is the one thing not required of an orchestral player. This surrender of self, this loss of musical identity for the good of the group, is a trauma from which the player may never recover. Whatever individual impulses remain are quickly suppressed by the conductor, as he strives to impose his own view of the music on everybody else. And this view changes as each

26 ■ SPD, pp. 263–264. Because this account of Bülow's memory, as told by Osborne, struck Stanford as being so extraordinary, he searched for someone who had actually witnessed Bülow walk onto the platform in Brighton that evening without any printed notes before him, as opposed to someone who had merely seen Bülow buying the scores in a London music shop earlier in the day. He found a witness whom he identified as "a musician, the late Dr. Sawyer", a resident of Brighton who had attended the concert and confirmed that Bülow had played everything from memory. The most likely time for this concert to have taken place would have been towards the end of April 1873, during Bülow's first visit to England. Sterndale Bennett's birthday fell on April 13, more than a week before Bülow arrived in the country, so Osborne's own memory of the incident was not entirely reliable. Stanford was wise to subject the matter to more careful scrutiny.

27 ■ BRAB, p. 502.



visiting conductor does his best to obliterate the interpretations left by his predecessors. In such a depressing context, the player becomes part of an ever-changing sound-scape, so to say, which is never quite his own, and which may even have a compulsory visual component attached to it—with all the strings bowing together, and all the winds breathing together, a picture-perfect image redolent of soldiers on the parade ground.

By the same token, few are the conductors who are able to convince the player of the rightness of their view, and so inspire them that they draw the best from them. Conversion, not compulsion, seems to be the key. One thinks of Furtwängler and of Beecham, of Bruno Walter and of Leopold Stokowski, but the list is painfully short. To this roll-call we must add the name of Bülow, whose players in the Meiningen and Berlin Philharmonic orchestras came to identify so completely with his world of sound that they willingly played as one. Of course there were conflicts, as the pages that follow amply demonstrate. But the rank and file were won over. It is sufficient for us to recall that when Bülow resigned from the Berlin Philharmonic, his players signed a petition urging him to stay, and referred to him as “our great teacher”.

## V

**T**eaching, in fact, was one of Bülow's lifelong activities, although he came to detest institutionalized instruction. When he was only twenty-five years old he was appointed head of the Piano Department of the Stern Conservatory of Music in Berlin (taking the place of the renowned pedagogue Theodor Kullak), a position he held for nine years. Later, at the behest of King Ludwig II of Bavaria, and in collaboration with Richard Wagner, Bülow took charge of the fledgling Royal Music School in Munich, and helped to draw up its first curriculum. It was to his summer masterclasses at the Raff Conservatory in Frankfurt, however, that an international cast of pupils flocked. They included Frederic Lamond, Vianna da Motta, Giuseppe Buonamici, Laura Kahrer and Theodor Pfeiffer, all of whom left vivid accounts of those days. Bülow, they all agreed, was a teacher to be revered, but also feared.

Unlike Liszt, who cast a benevolent ray of light on all his pupils, however poorly they played, Bülow took it to be his mission to drive the worst of them out of the profession. The concert hall of the Raff Conservatory was filled with young hopefuls each summer. Bülow was fond of making little speeches from the platform, filled with paradox and humour. “Piano playing is very difficult”, he warned his audience. “First we have to learn to make all the fingers equal. Then later, in playing music with several independent voices, we have to learn to make them unequal again. That being so, it seems best not to practice the



piano at all—and that is the advice I give to many”.<sup>28</sup> Because he could not abide incompetence, those pupils who played badly through sheer nervousness, or were simply not prepared, had reason to fear his sarcasm. He once listened to a young lady and, with the whole class looking on, turned to her with a deep bow and the caustic comment, “I congratulate you, Mademoiselle, upon playing the easiest possible passages with the greatest possible difficulty”. To another pupil, whose Beethoven playing lacked contrast, he remarked drily, “If you play the second bar exactly like the first, the public will say, ‘Good God, he is practising!’<sup>29</sup>

## VI

Closely linked to Bülow’s activity as a pedagogue was his work as an editor. He understood that a deep study of a musical text is as important for the performer as the study of fingerprints is for the detective. The printed page was like the bars of a prison behind which the composer held his muse captive. Those bars had to be removed. His editions of Bach, Mendelssohn, Chopin, and above all of Beethoven show the great detective at work. Every page of his edition of the Beethoven sonatas, for example, contains footnotes and commentaries on the text that are both exhaustive and exhausting. And they have but one purpose: to help the player release the ghost that the composer has imprisoned inside the machine.

Bülow’s editions do not meet the requirements of modern scholarship. They betray their time and place, as for that matter do the editions of Liszt, Tausig, Klindworth, Busoni, Schnabel and countless others who died before the Age of the Urtext was ushered in. Nor should we forget that they are performing rather than scholarly editions. Their chief fascination for us is that they illuminate Bülow’s own interpretations. If they were to be published today, some enterprising publisher would doubtless suggest that they be accompanied by a CD, in which Bülow himself would give some practical illustrations at the keyboard. Because recordings were unavailable to him, his detailed verbal injunctions were the only substitute.

Bülow was also a critic who did not hesitate to dip his pen in vitriol in defence of things he thought worthwhile. His early articles in the *Leipzig Signale* often created mayhem. One or two of them—his fulminations against the soprano Henriette Sontag, for example, and his attacks against the British musical establishment—brought him notoriety, and even resulted in an occasional death threat. But they all served the same purpose. They reminded the public that “in Art there are no trivial things”.

29 ■ ZMB, p. 37.



## VII

**F**inally, what of Bülow the composer? In a brief note on Bülow's compositions, Frederick Niecks delivered an opinion from which posterity has scarcely wavered. "So supremely eminent as an interpreter, both as a pianist and as a conductor, Bülow was sterile as a composer".<sup>30</sup> That was a harsh judgement. There are more compositions than are generally supposed, although it is true that they are hardly ever played today. During Bülow's lifetime his *Orchestral Fantasy Nirwana*, and his incidental music to *Julius Caesar* were frequently to be heard. And works for solo piano, songs, chamber music and choral music abound in his catalogue of works. His suite of piano pieces called *Il Carnevale di Milano*, op. 21, his *Ballade for Piano*, op. 11, and his *Mazurka-Fantasie*, op. 13 (dedicated to Cosima), are worth reviving. When Bülow himself was asked why he so rarely featured his own music in his programmes, he replied with uncharacteristic modesty that "others have written much better things than mine". Bülow was not the first musician to sacrifice his career as a composer in order to concentrate on promoting the works of others, but he may have been the most prominent. He saw his situation with clarity when he proposed the following device, which shows his name being supported by those of his three great contemporaries—Berlioz, Liszt and Wagner—whose music he spent a lifetime promoting at the expense of his own.

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## VIII

**A**s for Bülow the man, he was complex, difficult, always living on a knife-edge, and intolerant of much that he observed around him in humanity at large. He had no small talk. Normal conversation for Bülow took the form of debate. Disputation was the only way to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion. And he would continue an argument for as long as it took, finally wearing down his interlocutor. He would have made a brilliant lawyer, a profession for which he was at first intended but soon abandoned. His sharp intelligence was placed instead in the service of music, a discipline which he spent a lifetime attempting to transform, wishing to rid it of incompetents and ne'er-do-wells

30 ■ NPM, p. 481.



wherever he found them. Bülow might well have said of himself what the French statesman Lazare Carnot once said of Talleyrand, "If he despised men so much, this is because he had studied himself so deeply".

Bülow had a hasty tongue, and rarely bothered to varnish his remarks; he therefore made enemies who retaliated. Constance Bache, the English translator of some of his early letters, was not wrong to describe him as the 'best abused' musician of his time—with the exception of Wagner.<sup>31</sup> He was often asked to write his memoirs, but usually turned down the request with such ripostes as "life is too short for reflection", or "it is better to use such time for fresh work".<sup>32</sup>

## IX

**A**ny discussion of Bülow the man raises a matter that cannot be allowed to go by default. It is impossible to read his letters without observing the vein of anti-Semitism that runs through them.

His correspondence is laced with mindless references to "Jew-ridden Berlin", a "Jewish conspiracy", and even distasteful mention of a "Jew's greasy face" (this last being an observation about his one-time agent Julius Steinitz, who, in the 1870s, after their common expenses had been met, was extracting a usurious 25 percent commission from what remained). We call such language "mindless" because in nineteenth-century Germany comments of this kind were part of the *lingua franca*, picked up and thrown about with abandon by the population at large.

There can be no reasonable reply to the observation that it is not the job of a modern biographer to thrust his head through the canvas of history and give whomever he finds back there a lesson in political correctness. It has been well said that the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there. This thorny topic has in any case been dealt with in commendable detail by Bülow's most recent German biographer Frithjof Haas, and it would be a pity to waste another word on it.<sup>33</sup> We are nonetheless obliged to raise a fundamental question: was Bülow simply reflecting the temper of the times or helping to create it? To put the matter bluntly, was he the ventriloquist or the dummy? Like hundreds of thousands of Europeans, and not just Germans, Bülow was a thoughtless mouthpiece for individuals with dangerous ideas.

A very good example of this was his readiness to sign the petition against the Jews drawn up by the anti-Semitic agitator Dr. Bernhard Förster (1843–1889), whose other claim to fame was that he was Nietzsche's brother-in-law. Förster was a schoolteacher and author. In 1880 he drew up a petition against the Jews in Germany, addressed to Chancellor Bismarck, which quickly acquired 250,000 signatures. It was titled "Petition in der Judenfrage, an Fürst Bismarck", and was

31 ■ BEC, p. ix.

32 ■ BB, vol. 1, p. vi.

33 ■ HHB, pp. 312–322.



published in the *Berliner Bewegung*. German society, it warned, was being undermined by wave upon wave of Jewish immigrants who were crossing the German borders without restriction from Eastern Europe, and changing the fabric of the nation. Bülow signed it, along with all the others, but regretted having done so when he discovered that Wagner had declined Förster's request. In Cosima Wagner's Diary we learn: "[Wagner] reads aloud the ridiculously servile phrases and the dubiously expressed concern, 'And I am supposed to sign that!' he exclaims".<sup>34</sup> The best that can be said for Bülow's position in this sorry affair is that he tried to have his signature withdrawn, to no avail. Bismarck, incidentally, would have nothing to do with the petition.

Not long after signing Förster's appeal, Bülow went to Vienna and was asked about his action by his Jewish colleague, the publisher and concert promoter Albert Gutmann, who used to arrange occasional concerts for him in the imperial capital. Gutmann noticed that Bülow had included a group of Mendelssohn's "Songs without Words" in one of his recitals, and challenged him: "I heard that you signed the anti-Semitic petition in Berlin. How come that with such a disposition you put Mendelssohn into your programme?" "Very simple!" Bülow replied. "Because Mendelssohn was a Jew—like Christ!"<sup>35</sup>

Bülow, in fact, was a perfect example of the great paradox that so often entangles individuals in possession of those supreme artistic and intellectual gifts that were his. While condemning Jews as a group, he enjoyed warm and vital friendships with individual Jewish intellectuals and artists, friendships in which one finds no trace of the abrasive utterances he reserved for Jews in general. The two contemporary pianists he most admired—Carl Tausig and Anton Rubinstein—were both Jews. Among conductors, the one for whom he reserved the greatest praise was Gustav Mahler. Above all violinists he esteemed Joachim, and was proud to share the concert platform with him. He was the great defender of Felix Mendelssohn, whom he had revered from his youth. He also appointed Jewish musicians to the Hamburg and Berlin Philharmonic orchestras, basing such appointments on merit. For the last fifteen years of his life he entrusted every aspect of his public career to Hermann Wolff, his Berlin-based Jewish agent, who became far more than a business colleague, but a family friend as well. In politics, one of his heroes was the left-wing socialist Ferdinand Lassalle, "the Jew from Breslau", and a follower of Karl Marx. It was for Lassalle's "German Workers' Party" that Bülow composed a rousing anthem, to be sung at their rallies. And this raises a prospect of a somewhat different kind. If Bülow had been alive in Hitler's

34 ■ WT, vol. 2, p. 506.

35 ■ GAW, p. 16. Bülow was referring to the fact that Mendelssohn's father, Abraham Mendelssohn, had brought up his family of four children as Christians. They were baptised and received into the Protestant Church in 1816, the name 'Bartholdy' being affixed to their own, at the time of their conversion.



time, he would almost certainly have been sent to the gas chambers for his support of Lassalle and for his radical left-wing political views.

Were Bülow to revisit us today, he would surely marvel at the distance we have managed to place between ourselves and the prejudices of his time, and we suspect that he might want to argue with us about it. He would doubtless point out that long after his own demise, such luminaries as Franklin D. Roosevelt, Charles Lindbergh, H. L. Mencken, Henry Ford, Ezra Pound and Mark Twain<sup>36</sup>—the list is long—were uttering infractions far worse than the ones for which Bülow himself is properly brought before the bar of history, and he would be right to insist that they join him there, as indeed they have.

## X

**W**e do well to recall that for much of his life Bülow suffered from a variety of neurological symptoms which, while they did not succeed in diverting him from his chosen path, often resulted in friction with his fellow human beings, who usually had no idea of his physical tribulations. Yet there were times when to be in Bülow's company was to bask in the full nobility of a superior character. Toni Petersen, the daughter of the mayor of Hamburg, who knew Bülow well, put it best of all when she remarked ruefully, "When one is friends with Bülow, one has wonderful moments but sorrowful years".<sup>37</sup>

Descended from a distinguished military family in Germany, whose lineage can be traced back to the thirteenth century, personal discipline and the need to excel were instilled into Bülow from childhood. He spoke four modern languages—German, French, Italian, and English—and was well versed in the classics, writing both Greek and Latin. He was deeply read in the philosophy of Schopenhauer, whose pessimistic view of the world appealed to him. Optimism for Bülow was an impossibility, a preposterous principle on which to base one's life. "Pessimism", he once observed, "has made me more light-hearted, more philanthropic, more tolerant, more at ease, than that other absurd doctrine".<sup>38</sup> He daily looked the world in the face and saw it for what it was: a ridiculous tragedy over which one has little control. For Bülow there was no promise of anything at the end of the difficult road that life had marked out for him.

But, good Schopenhauerian that he was, he found redemption in one simple idea: it was not enough to have life, one must live it. And live it he did. Bülow packed so much activity into his relatively brief span of years, that there are times when the biographer can hardly keep pace with him. Nonetheless, the complex pleasures of his company make the journey well worthwhile. ❧

36 ■ Mark Twain's essay "Concerning the Jews" is widely interpreted as an anti-Semitic document, although he himself always denied it. It first appeared in Harper's *Monthly Magazine*, September 1899.

37 ■ S-WWW, p. 71.

38 ■ BB, vol. 5, p. 75.



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János Szegő

# László Krasznahorkai's "Eastern" Novels

## From the marches of Hungary to the ends of the world

**A**fter starting on his career as a freelance writer in 1983, László Krasznahorkai attracted considerable critical acclaim as he gradually distanced himself from Hungary's periphery and looked at this local area from ever further away, aiming for ever greater generality and universality, to switch, ultimately, to an inspection of totality and cosmic continuity.

His first full-length novel, *Sátántangó* (Satan Tango, 1985), was set in south-eastern Hungary, his native area. To be more precise, the locations in which his characters vegetate are strongly reminiscent of Krasznahorkai's home town of Gyula, but the overall picture that emerges is one of life in the eastern European peripheries. The perspective widened in his next novel, *Az ellenállás melankóliája* (1986; *The Melancholy of Resistance*, New Directions, 2002), with the harrowing tale envisaging not just a decline or Balkanisation of the con-

continent's eastern regions but an apocalyptic overthrow of East-Central Europe—including westernised Central Europe—as a whole. A third fruit of that same early period was a collection of short stories under the title *Kegyelmi viszonyok* (Terms of Grace, 1986). Deliberately placed last in that volume was a story entitled "Az utolsó hajó" (The Last Boat), the final sentence of which runs "That was Hungary."

The works of this first period are an initial approach to the realities and disasters of a geopolitical territory. They follow the submerging of this epic world, the crisis, and the all-embracing, all-pervading depth of the crisis, of the whole world. This is the point marking the first appearance of the East in László Krasznahorkai's fiction and with it a new beginning.

## East

**M**idway upon the journey of our life..." The third (and a key) chapter in *The Prisoner of Urga*, "Darkling Woods" refers

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to the opening lines of the first canto (The Inferno) of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. The way that Krasznahorkai unfurls the quotation is particularly enthralling and instructive. How, after all, can someone "discover" or "find himself" "lost"? To stay within the penumbra of Dante's lines, what sort of experience is it for a person to sense clearly the shadows and outlines of a bleakly darkening or darkling forest? The "discovery of being lost" is precisely what characterizes the narrator's awareness of arriving in Beijing. The differences and parallels between nature and civilisation are equalised in the pulsating heart of the metropolis. They intertwine. Never before had he seen the gloom that surrounded him so sharply. In what follows the phenomenon of "repetition" joins the duality of "loss": the bus network of the capital city becomes a map not just of Beijing but of existence as a whole. The true search is for what Kant (who is cited elsewhere in the text) refers to as a purposeless searching, or "pur-positiveness without an end." A searching for searching. What the narrator finds is not (merely) "the starry sky above and the moral law within", but as the originator of them, as if it were halfway between the law and the starry heavens, the unexpected, unwarranted, natural and sincere smile of the young guard. That moment becomes the purgatory of the journey.

*Az urgai fogoly* (The Prisoner of Urga, 1992) is the story of a journey. It moves between Mongolia and China, but the change of focus is more than just geographical. Whereas in the earlier books the creator of the narrated world was an observer and chronicler, here the first-person narrator appears. This is what literary historian Péter Szirák calls "the Urga conversion," pointing out that the work

is strongly reflective, more meditative than story-driven. It is not so much that novelty in the thinking is so marked as the change in perspective that it contains, which continues to hold the observer so firmly at its centre that its gaze becomes directed towards itself. The confessional mode of address and the privileged role of the individual are new in Krasznahorkai's oeuvre. The negative certainty of the earlier books is here replaced by rigorous self-contemplation and, at times, a lyrical softening. The dense text is saved from becoming an unfocused jeremiad only by what is Krasznahorkai's greatest strength as a writer: his talent for observation.

Arriving in the East after the "negative certainties" of contemplating a familiar and immediate domestic Hungarian world, the author-narrator strives to look on the unknown world with as open a mind as possible, with "rigorous self-contemplation."

The book documents this continuous presence and permanent state of open-mindedness, following by turn the conventions of reportage, a travel diary, even a picaresque novel. It is the story of a journey, the actual path that the narrator traced, and a journey of self-examination as he analyses his own reactions and reflections. A striking example of this is the meticulously detailed description of the train journey from Ulan Bator (Urga) to Beijing. The narrator wishes at all costs to be clear about exactly when he will arrive in Beijing:

...as a first step in the age-old procedure of deducing the time from the distance and speed, I got out a pencil in order to read off the hundred-kilometre measure from the scale that was to be found in the bottom left-hand corner of the map. And it was child's play to read off the hundred-



kilometre measure, as indeed it was to mark it off precisely fifteen times on my spindly little line, but when, to cross-check the product of one thousand five hundred achieved by this undeniably rough-and-ready means, and making allowance for the scale that applied there, I also examined the matter on another map I had, I discovered that the same line, in the same field of yellow, indicated one thousand three hundred kilometres. I was mindful of how meaningless my calculation would be if I were to carry on from the very outset with such a high degree of uncertainty, so without considering which of my two maps was correct, I turned to a third, a Chinese publication, declaring that imperial experience should be the decider. So I carried on measuring, comparing and assessing, adjusting and pinning down, and in the end growled: stone me!, the Chinese can't be trusted either, and it went on like this until I suddenly became aware that I was not occupying myself with the map and my little line but, for who knows how long, I had been staring out of the window obviously engrossed in the, to all intents and purposes, unavailing operations, I had looked up and, without being aware of it, my eyes had been glued to the far side of the window by something as I watched those dead mountains, stretching away further than could be seen.

He is thereby forced to admit that time, in a seemingly infinite space, is also emptied of meaning. It becomes an inarticulate formation:

maybe it was not my maps that were unavailing but my notions, the idea of trying to chop up into kilometres an entity, a boundless expanse of space that had been freed of any transient content, which in reality was indivisible.

Read in those terms, *The Prisoner of Urga* is not so much a novel about space as about time. It is interesting to note that Krasznahorkai's text matches the description of how time is made to stretch to infinity in the "Mental Gymnastics" section of Chapter 3 in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*:

But after all, *time* isn't 'actual'. When it seems long to you, then it is long; when it seems short, then it is short. But how long, or how short, it actually is, that nobody knows... A minute is as long—it *lasts* as long—as it takes the second hand of my watch to complete a circuit... it is motion, isn't it, motion in space? Wait a minute! That means that we measure time by space. But that is no better than measuring space by time, a thing only very unscientific people do. From Hamburg to Davos is twenty hours—that is, by train. But on foot how long is it? And in the mind, how long? Not a second!\*

The two quotations are linked by similar symbolism. The time perspective in *The Magic Mountain* is dominated throughout by the duality of mountain and plain, to which is attached the metaphor of the sea. Krasznahorkai's inserted little disquisition juggles with the same spatial configurations. His traveller is not only travelling in a time that has been drained to the 'bottom', as it were, but also on the figurative bottom of the sea: "my train was moving towards China in a dried-out sea basin; or to put it another way, I added in consternation, I am at the bottom of a would-be sea." In that sense we could identify the city of Urga with time itself, making the main protagonist a prisoner of time (as well as the story of his journey).

\* ■ Translated by Helen Tracy Lowe-Porter.



## West

**S**kipping over *Théseus általános* (Theseus Universal) of 1993, and *Megjött Ézsás* (Isaiah Arrived) of 1998, the next extended fictional work after *The Prisoner of Urga* was *Háború és háború* (War and War, 1999), the work of an author who may be considered untimely in the Nietzschean sense. It is a true end-of-millennium undertaking, a multimedia body of text (it comes complete with a CD-ROM). Extending even further in space, this novel too builds on the topoi of the journey and travel, even in the sense of the information highway. (In that respect it is very much the reverse of Krasznahorkai's earlier books, in which repetitive plodding on one spot and going around in circles were the dominant motions.) In *War and War* the chronicler is not a protagonist, but an omniscient narrator who tells a story in keeping with a detective thriller of an archivist who sets off into the world from the Hungarian provinces. Following up on his clues, the archivist prepares to go to New York. However, let's stay with the "Eastern" novels.

## East Again

**A**fter *War and War*, Krasznahorkai's attention again turned eastward with *Északról hegy, délről tó, nyugatról utak, keletről folyó* (From the North by a Hill, from the South by a Lake, from the West by Roads, from the East by a River, 2003). The singular title of this mystical novella itself signals that it is focused on a closed, intrinsically vital area that is delimited on all sides (it refers to the four ritual prescriptions that Zen Buddhists employ in siting their monasteries). The location now moves even further east—to Japan. Within the hypermodern, sped-up life of

the city of Kyoto it is an oasis which preserves the enduring values of an older way of life in the form of a Buddhist monastery and its mysterious garden. The work stages a collision between two states of the world, with the reader leaving the postmodern bustle of the outside world of the opening pages to enter the interior spaces of tradition. But after taking that journey, the reader, together with virtually the only figure in the book (a 'grandson' of Prince Genji, the eponymous hero of *The Tale of Genji*, the Japanese classic written by Lady Murasaki Shikibu around 1025 CE), has to return in the end to the chaotic world of the present. The Keihan train that brought Prince Genji's grandson to Kyoto vanishes within the twinkling of an eye. The final image that is presented graphically illustrates what is a specifically Japanese relationship between the ultra-modernity of life today and the careful deliberateness of traditional gestures:

The Keihan train arrived with a screech of brakes. It came to a halt beside the empty platform, the doors opened, but no one got off and no one got on, so the doors soon closed with a great hiss, the traffic controller dutifully looked to the end of the platform, first to the left then to the right, before motioning with the indicator board and then pressing the button on the starter lamp post then, last of all, slowly and ceremonially making a deep bow, and that is how he stayed, bowing to the ground, motionless and disciplined until the train had left the station.

As suggested above, *From the North by a Hill...* lacks a narrator. In his next offering, a documentary novel entitled *Rombolás és bánat az ég alatt* (Destruction and Sorrow under Heaven, 2004), Krasznahorkai returns to China and to the use of first-person-singular narration,



although the quotation that is used as the book's epigraph (in fact a working note made by Yan Fu whilst translating Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*) disputes the relevance of this manner of speaking, or maybe expands it to infinity: "The use of the first person singular does not signify 'I'."

The book is a log of the notes taken by the author in the course of his visit interlarded with interviews that he conducts with a wide range of Chinese intellectuals and masters on the relationships between perennial tradition and mundane daily life. The pairing of the two genres—travel diary and Platonic dialogue—creates a prism-like structure, with the journal sections documenting the contradictions that are being thrown up by China's headlong gallop towards modernity (or post-modernity), while the dialogues provide a chance to think about the interchange between East and West. Here the passages of sociological description draw on the tools of fiction much more obviously than in *The Prisoner of Urga*.

The narrator of this accumulating maze of "Eastern" texts is almost automatically identified as the author, that is to say, László Krasznahorkai. The underlying experience explored in *The Prisoner of Urga* was of a cosmic loneliness, *Destruction and Sorrow...* records the omnipresence of the crowd.

### East versus West

László Krasznahorkai's most recent work, a collection of shorter prose pieces published under the title of *Seiobo járt odalent* (*Seiobo Had Been Down Below*, 2008), brings together in counterpoint the two worlds, Eastern and Western. (*Seiobo*, incidentally, is the Japanese name for a goddess figure who is the Queen Mother of the West, the high priestess Mother of

Immortality.) Most of the seventeen tales are longish short stories, split between those set in the civilisation of the West, and those in that of the East: "Everything that you call transcendental and earthly is one and the same thing, [existing] together with you in a single time and single space", runs a snippet in the centrally placed text, "Master Inouye Kazuyuki's Life and Art". This experience of "singularity", the way the epic world, for all—or maybe precisely because of—its articulation and stratification, appears as a single entity, has been characteristic of Krasznahorkai's prose from the start. This single world has tended increasingly to be embodied in the monolithic idea of, or efforts towards, a single sentence. A single space, a single time and a *single sentence*—that is his transcendental realism. At the same time, and on that account, space and time in Krasznahorkai's works expand almost to infinity, which from another angle still means that they compose an infinitely-closed prose world.

The closed world of *Seiobo's* sentences is even further interlinked. Each text is denoted by a Fibonacci number, derived from the sequence or series in which, following the laws of the golden section, each member is the sum of the previous two (1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13... 987, 1,597, 2,584). Each successive story contains the sum of the preceding two, though not in the sense that the narrative is repeated or specific figures reappear; it is more a matter of an invisible arc which, in its very invisibility, creates the context for the volume. As the sentence that stands as the motto at the head of the allegorical text "Distant Authorisation" states: "In essence concealed, in appearance expressed". The hidden essence becomes a sensory experience on the surface of non-hidden appearance. Thus every single sentence



embarks on a mission to convey essence by appearance, meaning beauty. In most of the individual pieces some work of art is at the heart of the story, in order for a strange outside figure to enter its mysterious aura, an aesthetic space that is transfigured into a sacred space. The point of that entrance is generally complemented by a radical act of exiting in the closing part of the text. From that angle, the reader's perspective often corresponds with that of the unnamed protagonists of the stories: they discover the world together, together lose their way in a museum or town, only to come to a halt in front of some painting, icon, building or statue.

Side by side on the cultural map of *Seiobo* can be found localities in Mediterranean Europe (Andalusia, Barcelona, Tuscany, Umbria, Venice, Athens), Byzantium's Orthodox Christianity, the Near East, China and Japan. These geographical mixtures and exotic, esoteric or historical settings become gripping terrains as Krasznahorkai questions the status of tradition and also the very definition of copying in the aforesaid cultural areas. Whereas in the Far East imitation or duplication denotes a natural accession to a tradition, in the theology of Byzantium and Russia a copied work of art, after its consecration by a bishop, is just as authentic as the original (the difference between original and copy is obliterated by the verity of the truth). The third area where the status of tradition is interrogated is that of Renaissance Italy—the culture of Western man. Copying in the workshops of Renaissance painters did not have any metaphysical dimension; it was simply the most widely accepted means for the division of labour and acquiring skills. More than a few of the stories conceal a specific art-history case study: what we

get is a dual perspective, the story that is visible in the picture is overlaid with the picture's own history.

The most telling illustration of this dual narrative is the second piece in the volume, entitled "The Banished Queen". It tells the story of the Old Testament *Book of Esther* who supplants Queen Vashti as the favourite consort of King Ahasuerus of Persia. On another level, however, it discusses a series of panel paintings depicting scenes from the life of Esther and whether they should be attributed to Botticelli or Filippino Lippi. The detailed and wide-ranging argumentation, with all its digressions, leads Krasznahorkai to the problem of artistic creation. In many of the stories inset narratives arise alongside the main thrust of the text and the stories unfold in alternation. The procedure ensures that a dialectical approach is adopted, with two time points that are remote from each other being brought into a single, common perspective. The differentiation is radicalised by the declared identity of spaces: time becomes simultaneously archaic and postmodern in one and the same space. A Noh actor who during his performance stands outside time, in a time vacuum and in the eternal present of creation, afterwards gets on a Shinkansen express that hurtles towards Tokyo.

The two attitudes to time are also interpreted in other ways in this volume. For one thing, there exists the sense of time as sacral and infinite and ultimately inconceivable, but then, on the other hand, onto this cosmic, metaphysical time is tacked the real, physical time of those who are "insulted and humiliated". What the aura of lasting, timeless works of art awakens people to is, of all things, their own unique, one-off nature. A mirror image of that specialness is the



way, for instance, we get a glimpse into the profane processes at work during the making of a marvellous Renaissance painting: the assistants drink themselves stupid while the master haggles over the extra fee to be charged for urgently turning out a devotional picture. The more accomplished sentences somehow convey the effect of polyphonic monologues. An outstanding example of counterpoint is the piece "Master Inoue Kazuyuki's Life and Art". The renowned Noh actor, who can call the whole universe his home, finds refuge from the oppressive world that surrounds him in his WC, no less. It becomes his most intimate place, so much so that he even prays there. One might say that the WC is made a demonic parody of the universe, though in this particular case it is precisely the angelic character that dominates.

Creation and death—Krasznahorkai's sentences describe an arc between those extremes. The sentence itself, of course, is in itself one form of creation, the conclusion and completion of which in several instances is death or destruction. The story "He Rises at Daybreak" is particularly intriguing from the viewpoint of syntactical poetics. It concerns the day-to-day life of a mask maker, in this case, how he prepares a particular mask for a Noh play. In doing this the master is also a creator, putting a new face on things, in this particular case, a demon's face. From that point of view, the length of most of the story's nine sentences (the fourth sentence is spread over 12 of the 32 pages) takes on special significance, one

sentence mimicking the process of producing the mask by coalescing into a single unbroken whole.

The protagonists of these stories are often looking for something, pursued along the alleyways of bustling towns to become lost, waking up, as it were, to the fact that they long ago lost their way in their lives. The impetus injected by each new town (and bear in mind that Venice, Athens and Barcelona are strikingly sunny places) gives this fact a sensory dimension, makes it an aesthetic experience. The town's squares and museum rooms turn into labyrinths, with that labyrinthine quality faithfully mapped by the sentences. In some cases when it seems that the sentence in which he or she is proceeding will grind into nothing, only trust guarantees that eventually the reader will get somewhere. It is almost as if what is at stake in every single sentence is whether the reader's momentum will be maintained; whether the probing to the depths, so longed and hoped for, will come off. The narrative voice (which almost by reflex one identifies as the author) prepares the ground for that getting to the bottom by an almost total crumbling of the sentence boundaries and a loosening of syntax.

Krasznahorkai creates a linguistic world in which the words evaporate and the lengthy sentences are a sort of sieve which try to catch the meaning. He knows no compromise. His is a systematic search for the perfect sentence, while the marvellously formed sentences search for the story in order for the sentence itself to become the story. ●



Miklós Vajda

## George Szirtes at 60

George Szirtes: *New and Collected Poems*. Tarslet: Bloodaxe Books, 2008, 520 pp. • George Szirtes: *English Words—Angol szavak. Selected Poems—Válogatott versek*. Bilingual edition. Selected and edited by András Imreh. Budapest: Corvina, 2009, 115 pp.

Anyone opening the over five hundred pages that make up a recent volume of the collected and new work of George Szirtes enters an amply flowing stream of poetic consciousness of many hues. This was his fourteenth volume, with the poet reaching the age of sixty last year, which also provided the occasion for a 250-page critical analysis of his writing (John Sears: *Reading George Szirtes*. Tarslet: Bloodaxe, 2008). Corvina Press of Budapest marked it with a bilingual edition of 29 poems selected by András Imreh. The bulky book from Bloodaxe, however, represents just a part, albeit the most significant part, of Szirtes's oeuvre to date. In addition Szirtes is also a productive literary translator, and apart from that has written a continually growing number of essays, reviews and book prefaces. He is a regular voice on radio, holds poetry readings, has been on reading tours in Britain, on the Continent and in the US, edited several anthologies, has been a jury member in various competitions, and

teaches a course in creative writing at the University of East Anglia, keeping a hand in with painting and graphic art, in which he received his original training. Also, in recent years he has been writing a daily blog on the internet. He is interested in a wide range of things, has opinions about many, is a quick worker, and gives every sign that it is in writing that he truly lives. All that concerns a leading English poet of his generation, whose efforts have been recognised through his receipt of several important literary prizes, yet who does not put on airs but remains soft-spoken, warm-hearted and good-humoured.

Szirtes is an English poet, but one with a difference. I have heard him referred to as a Hungarian poet who decided to write in English, meaning that he could have written in Hungarian, but since he lives in England, he chooses to write those Hungarian poems in English. From remarks that he has made in the past, and indeed from Sears's book, even in England he is pigeonholed as a

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Miklós Vajda

is an essayist, critic and literary translator. For many years he was the literary editor of this journal, of which he became the editor in 1990. He retired in 2005. The Hungarian version of this review appeared in the 12 June 2009 issue of *Élet és Irodalom*, a Budapest literary weekly.



"Hungarian" poet, though in point of fact he has not written a line of his verse, or prose for that matter, in Hungarian. Nor was he in a position to do so. He was eight years old when, in 1956, after the crushing of the Hungarian revolution, he and his younger brother accompanied their parents who fled and ended up by settling in England. The parents chose the route of full assimilation, and so kept strictly to speaking only English even at home, which meant that the boy more or less forgot his native tongue. Having been dropped in the deep end at eight, through total immersion in English life and culture, he acquired a second mother tongue. He now thinks in English, grew up on English poetry and to this day has not picked up any demonstrable links with Hungarian poetic traditions, or if so, these are barely discernible, though he has written somewhere that every translation that he has done has left an imprint on him. While at work on composing a poem though, for him the very state of engagement with the language is still a particular adventure (a number of his poems touch on this) which a native English poet, if he or she chose to write on the subject, would certainly not register as an unusual experience. Right from the outset—maybe owing to a drive to assimilate—the linguistic and formal devices that he used, and now as an accomplished and accredited poet, the subjects he has explored for decades are, as far as I can judge, more individual and varied than those of many of his English-born contemporaries. A slight outsider quality, the imprint of a different early environment, an influence of a foreign past and language, is detectable in his very voice, as well as his perspective and the way he shapes his poems, say critics—a sign that his roots go back to the soil of continental Europe, and more specifically, to East and

Central Europe. That past only rarely surfaced in his works up until his first return visit to Budapest, in 1984, but the poet has since confronted the past locality that has been buried inside, and its living present, the scenery, the living idiom, culture and literature, all these re-emerge to become one of the main strands in his poetry. That staggering re-encounter has since then flowed like a life-sustaining infusion into the body of English poetry, providing stiff doses of another: the turbulent, less fortunate, ever grim Europe. In the view of some commentators, Szirtes by doing so has had a salutary effect on the not particularly diverse panorama of English poetry of recent years, by setting himself up as the "Hungarian" poet. To put it another way, they have their "Hungarian" poet, whereas we Hungarians have our "English" poet. There is no real foundation in such assertions, but all the same, a fair dash of truth in both.

In commenting on this in-between status in the preface to the volume, Szirtes notes that after the early years of searching for his identity, under the impact of the first return visit to the country of his birth, "I found myself becoming an English poet with a Hungarian past, or, to be more accurate, a fully baptised but increasingly residual-Christian (to use Peter Porter's term) English poet with a Jewish Hungarian past." That is not a programme, he hastens to add, any more than it is an *ars poetica*, I would rejoin: just a statement of fact, a product of the work of his proclivities, time and circumstances. But to be situated at the juncture of four so very different traditions is poetically exceedingly fruitful.

**H**e began to write when he was 17, and soon turned to formal verse; later on he was to display a mastery of the sonnet, the *terza rima*, and other rigorous forms.



It would be hard, indeed, to tell which of the denizens of the Parnassus of Anglo-American poetry he had absorbed most from. He makes passing references to the likes of Eliot, Auden, Spender, Ted Hughes, Peter Porter and Philip Larkin, but of course there are many others, including more classical influences. He studied painting and graphic art at art school, and he began work as an artist, meanwhile having already picked up much of the aesthetics of photography firsthand from his photographer mother. He thought that the aim of the poem was to make sense of, to create order in a circumscribed segment within the chaotic flood of reality, condensing into the poem as much as he can. This should include not only what is seen, but also what remains outside, the invisible, whether living or dead, and—through his reflections—himself as well, as per the “blind field” of Roland Barthes.

The power of the spectacle, the image and the metaphor can be sensed in even the early poems, and that has persisted. Many of the later poems take a sight or a poetic image as their point of departure, and in most cases those pictures are in colour. A whole cycle of poems is inspired by colours: true-to-life or dreamlike, imagined scenes, memories, observed incidents, symbolic figures, mini-narratives—all seen in the light of some dominant colour. The starting-point for a good few creations is not a direct view but a visual work of art, whether that is painting (David Wilkie, ‘Douanier’ Rousseau, Tiepolo, Rembrandt and Chagall), photography (Diane Arbus and André Kertész) or film (Busby Berkeley and Stan Laurel), but no attempt is made at verbal paraphrase; instead, the poem treats the spectacle portrayed by the artist in question as a reality, and analyses,

interprets and extrapolates it by placing it in a wider frame of reference with temporal, historical or personal associations.

There are also more than a few poems that take on a literary hue. One of the most compelling poems, for instance, was triggered by *Austerlitz*, the magnum opus of W. G. Sebald, a German-born friend and fellow university lecturer who died in a car accident, the novel about a man searching for traces of family members annihilated in the Holocaust, and meanwhile obsessively recording what he sees, mainly buildings, in photographic shots. It is a subject towards which Szirtes clearly feels a strong affinity. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the face of Kafka turns up from time to time in the poetic stream of consciousness, as does that of Bruno Schulz, the great Polish short-story writer-painter-graphic-artist, who, by virtue of being born (living and dying) in a small Polish town in Galicia, at various times of his life was a citizen of four different states until a bullet was fired into his skull in 1942 by an enraged German military officer. The artistic schizophrenia and split personalities of these writers that had produced major works, are close to his own, with the difference that Szirtes, like the somewhat older Russian poet Joseph Brodsky, also changed languages out of historical necessity. But Szirtes is a free spirit who has remained true to himself all his adult life. Both his parents had survived the Holocaust, his father in Hungary’s forced-labour service, his mother briefly being taken to a concentration camp. Other family members who perished, and whom thus Szirtes never knew, crop up every now and then as inhabitants in death of an ancestral land of origin that is located both in Hungary and Transylvania.



The most prominent aspect of the oeuvre to date has been its restless, questioning intellectuality, continually in search of explanations, hidden meanings, solid points, a dogged ontological curiosity. What are we? What is concealed behind the show-front? Is there any goal, order or sense in objects, in events, in history, in one's own past—in this chaotic existence at all, or do we just read these things in so as to be able to endure? That is why the relation of the apparent to the real, the mirror, sleep, the past, memory, images, language, time, and the frame that is secured by poetic form are so important. There are secure, tangible points: childhood, the mother who played such a major part in his life, but then also love and private life, recorded with a restrained, tender emotion, and poetry itself as a way of representation and as form, the means of simultaneously keeping in check and expounding chaos. Pathos, a lofty tone, cynicism, self-pity, posturing, cheap glitter—these are all foreign to Szirtes. He converted to Baptist on reaching the age of 21. In an interview he has commented that "I have a broadly religious temperament governed by an agnostic, fully secularised mind." He does not seek an answer in transcendence and metaphysics to the ontological questions for which he is constantly carrying out test drillings with his poetry; it either lies within us, or around us, or else it is nowhere to be found.

For all its philosophical edge, the poetry is not gloomy, abstract or dry, nor even conservative. The colourful metaphors, collages and paradoxes, the associations and the surprising, sometimes surrealistic leaps of logic in the poems, the laid-back, rarely tough, rich contemporary idiom, the virtuoso and varied versification, and also the

virtually omnipresent disharmony rule out any risk of monotony, but also of pessimism, even in the longer poems. He can be enigmatic at times, but not in a hermetic, exclusive manner. What he wrote in the Preface about one of his earlier volumes is still valid today: "... (they) have, it seems to me now, been attempts at moving beyond synthesis into the beginnings of some deeper, less personal, understanding of the human condition. And fair enough. That is what poetry is for." This world is an aggregation of contingencies; it is none too friendly, but it is liveable and incredibly interesting, full of mystery, tragedy, death and questions, but also capable of delivering beauty, grace and happiness, though not acquiescence.

**T**hat visit to Hungary in 1984 resulted in a genuine caesura. The somewhat divergent, heterogeneous subject matter of his poetry seems to have begun, from that point onwards, to crystallise round certain nuclei. This was a result not only of the renewed experience of Hungarianness and a resuscitated past but also, perhaps, of a deliberate aim to be more specific and focused. The 29 poems in the selection put out by Corvina Press highlight precisely the range of Szirtes's subjects: of the mother, a young man who is finding his legs in what is, for him, a foreign language and world, a poet who is rediscovering his Hungarian roots, and Budapest's ravaged, tormented soul. The long poem entitled "The Photographer in Winter", which might be regarded as an *ars poetica*, seeks to capture, in a dense field of reflections, the figure of, and the work done by, his mother, a commercial photographer, but while "photographing" that ephemeral figure, she is even more literally photo-



graphing him, and therefore so is the poet himself, admitting that, *"What seems and is has never been less certain"* and further on *"...memory would fail / To keep the living and the dead apart."* In other words, poetry, too, is nothing other than a continual aesthetic struggle to record inexplicable external and internal reality.

The old tenements of Kertész utca and the surrounding narrow streets of Budapest's inner-city Seventh District "sing" to Szirtes as his more strictly defined home territory. With their Eclectic and Art Nouveau façades, surprising inner courtyards with the outdoor walkway above them they conceal their own strange worlds. This part of the city, foreign and enigmatic, has also captivated his wife, the painter Clarissa Upchurch. They stimulated her to produce dozens of fascinating and very characteristic dreamlike paintings that record this experience so mystical to an English eye. A tangible product of this was the sumptuously illustrated album entitled *Budapest – Image – Poem – Film*, that was published by Corvina in 2006, the pictures being provided by Upchurch to illustrate Szirtes's prose and poems—or vice versa if you prefer. In "Reel" (see HQ 171), one of the longer poems, the poet guides his painter-wife around the Budapest of both his childhood and today, the place where *"Dull monuments express regret / For what someone has done to them, for crimes / Committed in names they're trying to forget / But can't."* "The Swimmers" are long-dead corpses of locals, drifting in time, under the vaults of a crypt in an English village church, but suddenly a bleeding, drowning girl appears among them, one who was shot into the icy waters of the Danube by Hungarian fascist thugs in the winter of 1944. "English Words", the poem that provides the

overall title for the volume, recounts the drama of having to switch languages. Language is untrustworthy, because it turns out not to be absolute, for after all it can be replaced by another one, but in the poet's hands in the end words nevertheless become "beautiful opiates." The outstanding "Four Villonesques on Désire" celebrates the natural history and immortality of desire in the tone of the French poet's elegiac ballads, though this is leavened with a bit of biochemistry, and it also flickers up the faces of some widely known dead individuals. "Northern Air—A Hungarian Nova Zembla," (see HQ 184) one of the longer compositions, produces from a fantastic medieval travel account a glorious allegory about the age of dictatorships, the exhilarating period of regime change and the fall of the Communist world, which the Szirteses witnessed in Hungary. The words of the travellers on a ship bound for an unknown North freeze in the air; they are unable to speak, silence and death reign at all hands, and in the ice can be seen

*the dead we had long stowed and carried through  
the journey, the beautiful loved dead, the young  
with their rifles and explosives, those who*

*stood on the street corners, the quiet unsung  
bodies under the rubble of war crushed  
by houses that collapsed like a lung*

*when the air was sucked out of them, the washed  
corpses laid out, the old still queuing for bread,  
the leaders hanging in the concrete yard, the rushed  
verdicts, the prisons...*

A thaw sets in and as they return to more southerly climes the frozen words that were floating around in the air now sound and life moves on in its own freewheeling and spontaneous confusion. It is a pity that the Hungarian translation



of this major poem is blemished by a number of misunderstandings, a sprinkling of which are also encountered elsewhere.

Still, Corvina's unassuming selection is judicious, though personally I am sorry that room was not found for at least one of the characteristic poems that profess Szirtes's painterly instincts. It is also a great pity that nothing has been included of the affectionate commemorative portraits that he has written about three great, now-dead Hungarian poets who are close to him: István Vas, Sándor Weöres and Ágnes Nemes Nagy, all of whom he knew personally and has translated. The most reliable Hungarian renderings of Szirtes's own work in fact have been drawn up by the likes of fellow-poets Ottó Orbán, Ágnes Nemes Nagy and Zsuzsa Rakovszky, but most other translators were also able to reproduce accurately the original tone of his poems. It has to be said in parenthesis that a few footnotes regarding the names and some references that are to be found in the poems would not have gone amiss for Hungarian readers.

**S**zirtes was born as a translator in 1984, and I am still rather proud of the fact that it was in my former capacity as literary editor of what was then *The New Hungarian Quarterly* that I managed to persuade him to see what he could do with some Hungarian poems for the journal. To start with, he found he needed the help of initial rough translations done by others, but it was not long before his old feeling for the sense of the language started gradually returning, and over the

years since then I was in the fortunate position of being able to publish several dozen of his splendid efforts in the journal. In the intervening years, apart from his translations of volumes of poetry by Rakovszky, Orbán and Nemes Nagy, and Imre Madách's mid-nineteenth-century verse drama, *The Tragedy of Man*, he has produced translations of a growing series of novels by the likes of Dezső Kosztolányi, László Krasznahorkai, Sándor Márai and Ferenc Karinthy, and we were co-editors of *An Island of Sound*, an extensive anthology of contemporary Hungarian poetry and fiction that The Harvill Press published in Great Britain in 2004.

The English readership for Hungarian poetry would fit in an average recital room, Szirtes once wrote. It was never realistic to think in terms of a football stadium, but now, to make up for the forgettable efforts of native Hungarian amateurs who were never poets, with time it seems that an ever larger hall will be needed, because he personally (not to mention a growing number of other outstanding British and American poets), through his own work, has managed to transplant translated Hungarian poetry into his own oeuvre, British cultural soil, that is, thereby also securing for it an enduring English afterlife. That is something of which only a true, significant English poet is capable. George Szirtes is one such, the "Hungarian poet" of the English, and our very own "English poet." It is a pleasure to think that both English and Hungarian poetry still have much to look forward to from him. ●



Tamás Koltai

# Drama in a Time of Crisis

Bertolt Brecht–Kurt Weill: *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*

- Ödön von Horváth: *Kasimir and Karoline* • William Shakespeare: *The Merchant of Venice* • Botho Strauss: *The Park*

**K**urt Weill composed *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* to a libretto by Bertolt Brecht at the very time when the world was entering The Great Depression. A parable of capitalism, it is a typical crisis product, a symptomatic expression of the mass financial and intellectual pauperisation that was to lead straight to fascist dictatorship in Germany. The first staging of the piece, in Leipzig in 1930, provoked scandal from Nazi sympathisers, and a little more than eighteen months later (December 1931) it was only in a censored version that it was allowed back on the stage, in Berlin, to be banned in 1933 when Hitler was appointed chancellor. Ever since then, wherever it plays, whether a crisis is at hand or not, the piece has somehow always managed to feel very topical. The 1988 Salzburg Festival production was mounted amidst media forecasts of a collapse of the social market economy. *The Independent* of London ran an article by Neal Ascherson, under the title "We live under the most arrogant of all world orders, but it will not last." In this he asserted: "Within a generation ... a season of rebellion and upheaval will return, in the

rich zones of Europe as much as in the poor countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America." That has not happened as yet, though there has been a hunger strike in Slovakia, and we are now well into a second World Slump.

Some days before the opera was revived in March 2009 by the Hungarian State Opera at the Thália Theatre I saw an article in *Der Spiegel*, according to which a leader of the neo-fascist NPD declared that his party was ready to assume power as and when the population "have had it up to here." At present the NPD has representatives in only three of the German provincial parliaments, but in the elections for members of the European Parliament held in June 2009, the extreme right made startling progress in several countries. In Hungary the anti-Semitic, anti-Roma party Jobbik, which in the 2008 general elections for Hungary's Parliament did not even achieve the 5 per cent hurdle set as the minimum to gain parliamentary representation, secured more than 14 per cent of the votes cast.

The global crisis that has arisen from over-indebtedness has hit hardest people

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Tamás Koltai,

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on low incomes who are in debt, those on the periphery of society. It is leading, as night follows day, to the disintegration of norms of co-existence. Economic catastrophe in turn brings moral decay, the nullifying of principles and ideals, the Hobbesian war of everyone against everyone, chaos and anarchy. In *Mahagonny* the metaphor for this is the typhoon which threatens to destroy the town. In the opinion of Theodor Adorno, in a 1930 essay on the opera: "the blind bourgeois world, entrapped in nature, is epitomised by typhoons as unpredictable crises, and can only be illuminated and become amenable to change in the shock of catastrophe." Adorno's view and the town of Mahagonny at all events awaken curious associations: "*We have no need of hurricanes, / We have no need of typhoons / The havoc a typhoon can wreak, / Is havoc that we can... wreak,*" two lumberjacks sing. The town's inhabitants thus play an active role in the dismantling of moral barriers, the rise of anarchy to replace the rule of law, and the fact that destruction is wrought. The contemporary audience at the first night could therefore see themselves at work in the story that unfolded on the stage: the Hitlerism that ensued within a few years after that first performance was a ghastly mirror of the consequences outlined in the play.

One can just imagine what a huge provocation the finale was at the time of the Weimar Republic, with the chorus growing into a marching column of protesters holding up placards that demand immorality and illegality. We know what happened next in Germany and, indeed, across Europe. How, then, should we judge with a cool head the marches in towns and villages of Hungary by the paramilitary Hungarian Guard, banned on the day that this article is being

written? Can one trivialise that? Or should we laugh it off, as people did in the case of a small ultra-Leftist group whose members demonstrated outside the Opera House in Budapest against the Opera Ball, waving red flags and displaying their backsides? As it happened, that same evening, the premiere of this new production of *Mahagonny* was being given just a block away, in the Thália Theatre. In other words the provocative anti-wealth demonstrators were barely 100 metres away from a performance of Brecht and Weill's biting social commentary without showing the slightest awareness of this. Is that not bizarre? Except that over the last two and a half years Budapest has witnessed many more radical protests, with far nastier slogans than that. It is to be hoped that the city is only the setting for a reprise of the piece, not the history it refers to.

The main characters in *Mahagonny* are fleeing from the police and thus are, at one and the same time, both criminals and victims, like Macheath in *The Threepenny Opera*. Widow Begbick, Fatty (in later versions Willy), the Chief Clerk and Trinity Moses, the "founders of the state", create and represent in miniature, in their own image, its power, its administration, its economy and its law. Back at the time of its early performances the Nazi press, which got the message, were hypocritically indignant about a murderer being made public prosecutor and a parody of God, and Widow Begbick, a procuress, being made a judge. Jimmy (or Jim) Mahoney (aka Paul Ackermann), the lumberjack, rebels against "law and order", because he finds it boring, and he proclaims the principle that "anything goes", which soon buries him, too, when he finds himself unable to pay for three bottles of whisky—the most heinous crime that can be encountered in



Mahagonny, one for which he is condemned to death.

In truth it is the Anarchist who topples the restraints of Order, with immorality being tolerated as long as you are able to pay for the pleasures that it offers. If you overstep that mark, however, Order will destroy you, and above your corpse God, as personified and satirised by the arch killer, is symbolically murdered. The lack of inhibitions that is unleashed en masse takes power. With Brecht and Weill the humanistic values of the Christian middle classes are turned inside out, and the traditional operatic forms that are appropriate to transmit them are subverted. In their love duet Mahoney and Jenny sing about whether the girl should wear knickers, while in a trio about the town's financial status Weill provides another parody by poaching the melody of the lines sung by Widow Begbick from the orchestral accompaniment to Leonore's Act I aria in *Fidelio*: "Ab-scheulicher, wo eilst du hin" ("Abominable man! Where are you hurrying?"). In other words, the musical connoisseur will recognise that a parallel is being drawn between the two heroines, the earlier one standing for opposition to the political tyranny of the prevailing monarchy, whereas her latter-day counterpart sings of the economic tyranny of the capitalism of the present. Librettist and composer were seeking to provoke individual reflection and resistance to mob mentality—still highly relevant in today's climate with the crisis still on-going, unemployment rising, a lynch-mob mood growing, and—in Hungary for one—not only in words. Although this particular production of *Mahagonny* by the Budapest State Opera at the Thália Theatre (directed by János Szikora), taken as a whole, was marked by artistic timidity,

nevertheless a faceless military unit makes an appearance right at the very end as a faint symbol of the threat to order posed by dark forces.

**T**he German-language Austro-Hungarian dramatist Ödön von Horváth likewise wrote the play *Kasimir and Karoline* at the time of the Great Depression, in 1932. It very explicitly speaks of that crisis. To be more specific, about its moral and human repercussions, its negative impact on human spirits. If, like Kasimir, a man is sacked overnight, that dominates his whole psyche. He is no longer able to sup his stein of beer quite so serenely at Munich's traditional beer festival, the Oktoberfest, let alone ride on the ghost train at its fairground. His fiancée also has no more reason to be happy, because she is promptly confronted by someone who declares that at times like this love, as a rule, goes into steep decline. Karoline categorically denies this, saying that "if things are going badly for a man, a woman will stick by him even more tightly," and she even underpins her moral stance on philosophical grounds: "A general crisis should always be kept apart from private life."

Her new acquaintance, a stranger, does not agree: "In my view the two spheres are perilously intertwined"—an eerie idea whose topicality can hardly be doubted in the Hungary of today. At every turn, we find that the effects of social crisis insinuate their way into all relationships between humans, including those with family and friends. Not so long ago a Hungarian documentary was made about how families can be rent into two because its members support different political parties. Indeed the political dividedness that has been typical of the country over



the last decade is tragically manifest in everyday life, as anyone can experience simply by going out into the street, queuing at the post office or taking a tram ride. One had better be prepared to receive comments on one's origin, skin colour and sexual orientation, or merely about what newspaper one reads (not to mention the general football-crowd atmosphere or the physical assaults on participants in a gay-rights march).

To make of that an artistic truth that can be put on the stage calls for a deep understanding of von Horváth's play and of present-day Hungarian realities. A successful attempt to do so was made by the Móricz Zsigmond Theatre of Nyíregyháza under director Péter Forgács. A festival prize was given to the production, which means that they have also been invited to appear at this summer's national get-together for theatres, which showcases the season's best. The director hit upon an obvious metaphor to make sense of the sour mood, sullen hatred and rank state of affairs today. The jostling crowd at the Oktoberfest, which is the setting for the story of the play, is staged in this production as a paralysed grandstand. Whereas the mundane reality of the play is a *mêlée*, in this production it is consternation; whereas the high jinks in the background provided a contrast to the deteriorating mood in the original play, in the Nyíregyháza production the high spirits have already been let off, giving way to the tense, vacantly goggling, stupefied impotence of a general hangover. At the opening of the play, as originally conceived, the cast gaped at a Zeppelin airship floating in the sky—in those days at the height of its popularity and the very symbol of unobtainable beauty, lightness and refinement—here they stare at a "thingamajig", which presumably has a

similar function but cannot be named, not only because Zeppelins are a thing of the past, but also because they have no successor—only a longing for *something* intangible and inconceivable.

The red grandstand with its rainbow-hued crowd is a cross-section of society. Everyone is constantly on stage, but the characters are merely present, not participants; there is no connection between them, they are preoccupied with themselves, they are wasting their breath and might as well be talking into thin air (even when they speak to each other). They exist in a state of social vacuum, there is no communication between the characters, their existence is sheer self-gratification (sometimes literally so); their temporary awakening from apathy, the St Vitus's dance that shakes them in their seats is just as much a compulsive activity as their movement through the passage under the stand or between rows. Only the Waitress moves about among them with her Coca-Cola tray, swapping beer mugs and shot glasses (one empty for another)—the latter lined up in a row before delirious gazes at the bottom of the stand. The sole collective experience is a sentimental melancholia sublimated into song. A few emblematic or evergreen hits are heard as parodies of kitschy songs lamenting the national fate, but a much more radical solution is that the fairground "freaks" of the play are not the usual spectacles of congenital deformities but sleepwalking *public figures* in search of their roles, they are representatives of political and spiritual life, ministers of state or religion. Anyone wishing to do so may try identifying them, but it is more comfortable to pretend not to notice that the story is about us. As one of von Horváth's characters says: "As long as a doorman can sit next to an under-secretary, a greengrocer next to a bank



manager, and a chauffeur next to a minister, I cannot speak highly enough of democracy," before adding: "Politics here or crisis there, nothing here can wreck that." Only that's not what the director thinks, so he has written in a new scene after the one in the original play where a mass brawl breaks out. "Why did it break out?" goes von Horváth's line. "Over nothing" is the response. At this point in the performance the crowd verbally turn on each other, revile lawyers, the police, conservatives, liberals, Gypsies, Hungarians. This is all familiar stuff to my fellow countrymen: everyone sees someone else as being to blame. In the end, a road sweeper tidies up the litter. There are few theatres that would have gone to the trouble of thinking through so penetratingly how the credit crunch afflicts us today.

**R**eaching across the centuries, Shakespeare's plays are perhaps capable of a similar feat. If anti-Semitism is taken to be a symptom of social crisis—and in the Hungary of today one cannot help but take it to be that—then *The Merchant of Venice* is a compulsory piece for the theatre. There was a time when it was a frequent victim to the march of history and to expropriation for political purposes, being played now as a philo-Semitic, now an anti-Semitic work, or yet again not performed at all because the powers that be—and during the postwar period of Communism they prevailed for some four decades—hit upon the idea that if the play is not performed, then no one could appropriate it. By making it taboo they appropriated it for themselves.

A new production of the play by the Gárdonyi Géza Theatre of Eger goes beyond the mundane sphere of immediate timeliness to take on a more

anthropological examination of human relationships. This production, under director Sándor Zsótér, places the fundamental conflict of the play—the tension between emotions and the law—under scrutiny. Should the heart or the law claim its due? The heart is a metaphor for love (though in *The Merchant of Venice* it is more than that as Shylock is supposed to cut from Antonio's body, if not the heart, then specifically a pound of flesh as the agreed bond), whereas the law is the collection of regulations that claims its due. Shylock, in appealing to the law, insists on having his pound of flesh from Antonio's body, whereas Portia, referring to the same body of law, obstructs him on the grounds that the bond was only about flesh, not blood. So she lets Shylock go ahead; but if just one drop of blood is spilled, he will be dead meat. The argumentation may strike one as ingenious from a legal standpoint (that is, if it is possible to speak about justice at all within the framework of a play that verges on fairy tale), but it is precisely this that makes it possible to question the omnipotence of the law. If one person seeks another person's blood (to put Shylock's intention symbolically in such terms), it is possible to sanction that under the law. However, the hatred that attends the verbal intention is something more serious than what can be sorted out by legal regulation. To put it another way, we relive this same conflict whenever we debate whether hate speech should be treated as a criminal offence (in Hungary a controversy on this issue has been raging for years). And if that is done, can the social problem for which redress is sought be regarded as settled? This is a question because there is always some way of twisting the law; sanctions are no cure for social ills.



Hate speech would translate into action when Shylock has to plunge the knife into Antonio. In this production this is a prolonged, frozen moment: Shylock stands behind Antonio and reaches forward under his armpits, almost holding him in his arms, to raise the knife in a transfixed gesture. The same image is repeated later on as well, with Bassanio holding Antonio the same way seeming to suggest that it is a matter of tortuous, complicated, undigested emotions rather than polarised extremes. The mutual hatred that Shylock and Antonio bear for each other is just as irrational as the mutual love that Antonio and Bassanio bear for each other; the former is fed by prejudices, hysteria and selfishness, the latter by biological instincts. As a symbol of the complexity of love and hatred and the ambivalence of human nature, after the "contract" is drawn up the three figures lie down on the ground on pillows that are laid next to each other, with their heads resting almost on each other's laps—a moment that is not without playful irony.

Nor is the performance as a whole without irony. In the background a film showing heart surgery is frequently projected, with the metaphor thus becoming reality, so that we can literally see what it means to cut a chunk of the "centre of the emotions" out of a man. The very heartbeat of Antonio is audible when he receives the news that his ships have sunk, and the cheap little devotional Sacred Heart pictures in his home transmit their own light signals. That home merely signals a modern, run-of-the-mill housing-estate average with fair-to-middling furniture, a writing desk, a TV set, a mattress thrown onto the floor, behind which a semicircle of a multi-storey row of photograph houses rises on the stage. It is a sort of collective

abode in which all the cast "live", with the mattress on the floor also being a shared bed, and the actors every now and then putting on fresh sheets and pillow cases of different colours, not so much because the situation demands this, but for the sake of a general sense of the comforts of home. To let one know one is at home. In watching the performance one is seized by the feeling of a pleasant high-rise housing estate flat, with the actors themselves moving around easily as if at home, in no hurry, giving walks to small toy dolls, spreading out on the floor, and treading on the blocks of the estate. There is just one point at which a dumb show is presented of them stepping out of themselves to mime a street ruckus. Antonio and Shylock carry on their brief closing dialogue on the *shared* mattress. Is this a start or the end? There is no way of knowing. This production was also a festival winner and featured at the national get-together.

**A**s did Botho Strauss's play *The Park* (1983), which was modelled on Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and is performed here at the National Theatre in Budapest (director: Róbert Alföldi). There is a point in the play where it is remarked that a recession is in progress, and many people evidently took this to be something that had been written into the script retrospectively for the sake of giving it a topical feel, though in fact that is not so: it was there to start with. In any case, the play is not so much about economic disaster as about intellectual, sensual and mental decline. A total anaesthetisation, blunting and degeneration of existence, a state in which mankind regresses to a lower stage. Titania and Oberon, the fairies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, here try to act on mankind's "instincts mutilated by self-consciousness



and business" and to inculcate in them, "in voters of fully mature age... desires that are buried deep inside." Oberon, in final determination, is even prepared to mingle among people, but to no avail: "everyone here just moans and groans on account of their own mediocrity." That includes jumbled married couples, and very petty bourgeois (one of them, for the sake of emphasis, changes into a little boy), and youngsters with empty souls who are just goofing around. The setting is arid everyday reality, a litter-strewn city park, uniform flats behind the glass panes of windows in a housing-estate tower block, a place of amusement. The portrait is not naturalistic, however; its tool is not rudimentary, corrupted idiom but, on the contrary, a flirting with the poetic, the lofty, the mythic. A collision between worlds in other words. There is a whole series of questions to unravel. Who, for instance, is the artist Cyprian, Oberon's servant and a purveyor of substitute myths, who mediates between the two worlds by supplying magic amulet statuettes for sale? What is the meaning of self-mutilation, self-exposure and self-display—one is conversant, perhaps, with the exhibitionism of deserted parks—to a Titania "transferred into a blood myth," and what to addled folks "if the zeitgeist and their clothes merely limit them in the gratification of their desires"? And what is one to make of the metaphor of the dream of a midsummer night's sleep, if the sleep is not real but just that it seems to one of the characters that everyone is sleeping, and nobody is waking them up as they drift from one inexplicable transformation (or self-delusion) into another?

The capacious, nearly empty stage is spectacular: an enormous disc of the moon floats before a black backdrop. A roller blind and ripped screen open to reveal a bizarre vision of a randy Titania.

A bare shrub rises by the stage trap lift to its place centre-stage. A long, black artificial-leather couch gives an intimation of the interior in which the couples swap. Background music billows to underpin the themes, with Johann Strauss, Berlioz and Wagner offering emotional handholds to the text. Titania is a flitting, self-revealing and ultimately sad sprite who teasingly asks (and that includes the audience) for assistance in assuaging her inexhaustible lust. Oberon is a dignified, inflexible man, whereas homoerotic powers reside in the artist Cyprian, who manufactures the mythic statuettes. Ordinary couples, on the other hand, are confronted with their own mediocrity, since that is what the tale is really about: about the actual and the mental rubbish that is littered about "our park". That awakens an uncomfortable feeling. If Titania or Oberon flash their overcoat (that is to say, expose themselves) that is particularly shocking if the members of the audience do not see them directly but the effect the gesture has on the other person. Right to the end the play is a series of internal conflicts. The characters suffer numbingly and impotently from being emotionally drained and hollowed out, from "unfamiliar" concepts that, whether "positive" (patriotism, for example) or "negative" (racism), they do not know how to handle. The fairy beings give us a presentiment that there is also another dimension: "Around us stroll incubi and ghosts; they enjoy the same rights as us voters, and they have influence," one of the characters remarks. This dimension is most horrible as the characters are absolutely unprepared for it. Although this production was only partially successful in communicating the play's virtues, maybe it stimulated some to take stock of their own personal crises. ■





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*He retraced his steps for several days towards Kashmir, and on 16th July 1821 two men who had both covered a long distance met on the bank of the hurtling River Dras, lying in a Himalayan valley at an altitude of over 3,000 metres. One was the Székely student Alexander Csoma de Kőrös, who was crossing this remote part of the world carrying no more than a haversack, while the other was a wealthy and influential veterinary surgeon, William Moorcroft, an Englishman, who at this point in time was the superintendent of the stud of the East India Company near Calcutta. This chance encounter was to have an unforeseeable and decisive significance for both men. Csoma, on Moorcroft's advice, was to switch to Tibetan studies which were to make him world-famous, whereas Moorcroft, for his part, was strengthened in his hope that Europeans could penetrate Afghanistan.*

**(Géza Bethlenfalvy on Alexander Csoma de Kőrös)**

