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*Terrorism and Human Rights*

*Nation and State  
in Modern Hungarian History*

*Czeslaw Milosz's "Antigone"  
and the 1956 Revolution*

*Nagybánya:  
The Hungarian Barbizon*

*Kádár's Shadow*

*Finance Ministers for Breakfast*

*Of Pianists and Executioners*

*Hungarian Roots, English Traditions*



# The Hungarian Quarterly

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## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

**Cover:** Károly Ferenczy: *Paintress*, 1903. Oil on canvas, 136x129.5 cm.  
Hungarian National Gallery.



Ottó Orbán

*On The Destruction of  
the Twin Towers  
of New York's World Trade Center*

*A New York-i Világkereskedelmi Központ két lerombolt tornyára*

*Time runs on and on, like the Danube flowing along in its bed,  
We know not whence it comes, nor where we're being led.*

Three black machines launched like arrows into the blue,  
The madman's answer to this era's doubt—what is false, what true?  
Blackest clouds billow from concrete with kerosene's bursting yellow bubble.  
Babel falls, and Babylon's falling too in mounds of smoking rubble.

*Time runs on and on, like the Danube flowing along in its bed,  
We know not whence it comes, nor where we're being led.*

Today's our day of slaughter, the news today brings news of ghastly death.  
The voice today's a fearsome voice that cries out, Dies Irae! with the world's last breath,  
Today is the day of wrath, and the day of the dead is today,  
The dead will be gathered with mourners who grind their teeth as they pray.

*Time runs on and on, like the Danube flowing along in its bed,  
We know not whence it comes, nor where we're being led.*

Shattered glass showers from myriad windows, from girders of toppling steel,  
Bodies float drifting like feathers blown down from the blue sky—unreal!  
Inconceivable, unimaginable—the bright citadel  
On lower Manhattan suddenly sunken, subsiding in burning hell.

---

Ottó Orbán

*is a poet and essayist, translator of many British, American, Spanish and other poets.  
Three volumes of his poems have been published in English translation, The Blood of the  
Walsung (1993), The Journey of Barbarus (1995), and Our Bearings at Sea (2001).*



*Time runs on and on, like the Danube flowing along in its bed,  
We know not whence it comes, nor where we're being led.*

What can be saved we must try to save from this flaring holocaust,  
Pouring on water to drown the hot roofs, though all's been lost.  
A tiger was preserved by Noah on his Ark: kept as a glowing ember.  
A dead fireman's the city's cenotaph; and its monument, September.

*Time runs on and on, like the Danube flowing along in its bed,  
We know not whence it comes, nor where we're being led.*

*Translated by Jascha Kessler*



# Terrorism and Human Rights

The events of 11 September have produced shock waves all over the world. The sheer blind merciless fanaticism of the action filled us with horror: the sudden violent and seemingly easy way in which our settled and relatively ordered existence could be disrupted filled us with fear.

People who are horrified and afraid call for certitude and safety and action—so we have a war against terrorism.

The target is Osama bin Laden protected by the Taliban in Afghanistan but the language has been taken by many to be much more inclusive, taking in Chechens, Palestinians, Kashmiris, Armenians, Kurds and others, over and above obvious examples like ETA, the IRA or the thought-to-be defunct Red Brigade. Turkish Cypriots talked of terrorism, meaning Greek Cypriots; Greek Cypriots talked of terrorism, meaning Turks.

I am told that the world-respected news agency Reuters does not use the word “terrorist” in its reportage because it has no sufficiently precise definition.

I think most people would accept that if you kill or indeed harm innocent people in pursuit of some political or religious objective within a democratic society, you are a terrorist. Even in a totalitarian society, indiscriminate killing can in no way be justified but targeting military objectives or persons at once brings one into a hazardous moral swamp where some justify a certain violence to achieve the overthrow of the greater violence of sustained repression and the “terrorist” in one person’s vocabulary becomes the “freedom fighter” in the language of another.

We saw this pattern in Kosovo where for nearly a decade Rugova sought support in Western Europe and the States for his peaceful struggle against the re-

---

*Text of an address by **Lord Russell-Johnston**, President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe at the 10th anniversary of the Central European University, Budapest, 13 October 2001.*



pression which Milosević orchestrated but until the KLA arrived and committed violence—terrorism or freedom fighting—no-one paid attention. The vicious circle here is not yet complete though we can see daylight.

The problem is how to contain terrorism and to do it without placing human rights at risk from the actions of the very people who defend them.

For a week now, the United States and my country, the United Kingdom, have been engaged in a military operation against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. I support this operation. Terrorist networks have operated in Afghanistan with the knowledge and consent of the Taliban authorities, who allowed them to plan and carry out terrorist attacks all around the world with full impunity. One could not allow this to continue.

But my support is not unconditional. We do not have to look very far to see how a legitimate response to a security threat can turn into a self-perpetuating, destructive and seemingly endless circle of violence and abuse.

**I**n August 1999, a group of armed Chechen combatants, led by Shamil Bassaev, who had previously fought on the Russian side in Abkhazia, stormed into several villages high in the mountains of Dagestan. I have been there.

They pillaged, plundered and killed. In September, two apartment houses, in Moscow and Volgodonsk, were blown apart, killing several hundred people. Russia was under attack. It had not only a right, but also a duty to fight against the terrorist threat. The second Chechen war began.

Two years later, Shamil Bassaev has lost a leg, but he's still around. The perpetrators of the terrorist attacks in Moscow and Volgodonsk have never been identified. Grozny, a city of 400 000 people, the size of Edinburgh, where I went to university, was bombed to ruins. The list of Russian casualties is steadily growing, as is the length of the list of human rights abuses committed by the Russian security forces for which, very few, if any, of the perpetrators have so far been brought to justice. After all the destruction and loss of lives, on both sides, terrorism, if you wish to define it so, persists.

This is a lesson that those carrying out the riposte to the attacks in the United States should bear in mind.

It certainly was a lesson that dominated the recent Assembly debate on democracies facing terrorism. The final text of the resolution accepted the possibility of military action against the perpetrators and organizers of the attacks in the United States, provided that any such action was approved by the UN Security Council, that it clearly defined its objectives, that it avoided targeting civilians, and was generally conducted in conformity with international law.

The message of the Assembly was simple and straightforward. Yes, we must act against terrorists, as swiftly and decisively. Yes, we are entitled to use force, if necessary. But using force in a disproportionate and indiscriminate manner, as has been done in Chechnya, will only make things worse.



You may say this is typically vague and well-meaning of an international body but it really is the only approach which will produce any stable solution.

The second potentially fatal threat to the success of the international fight against terrorism comes from the exaggeratedly pragmatic attitude of some western leaders who, in their eagerness to win a military campaign, are ready to turn a blind eye to the human record of their newly-found allies.

In my opinion, there is a danger of the United States repeating the errors it made during its ideological battle against communism, when, particularly in Central and South America, it financed and supported right-wing dictatorships simply because they weren't Communist.

Again, let me use the example of Russia, although this is far from being the only example, and is perhaps not even the best one. For all its faults, the human rights and democratic record of the new Russia is considerably better than that of several other members of the anti-terrorist alliance. But Russia is big, it is important, and it is a member of the Council of Europe.

Moscow's support of the international campaign against terrorism is crucial, but in obtaining it, we should not trade our values and principles. We cannot accept the notion that the fight against terrorism is incompatible with respect for human rights. If, after 11 September, there is anything that requires "a differentiated evaluation" to repeat a phrase Schroeder used, in world opinion on Chechnya, it is the world leaders' half-hearted, soft-peddalling attitude with regard to the Russian conduct so far in that war.

I have to say I was extremely impressed by President Putin's performance during his recent tour of European capitals. He showed great diplomatic skill. His decision to associate Russia with the international campaign in such a resolute and unequivocal manner is certainly historic.

But it is time to ask the Russian President to match his words with action. Russia can make a decisive contribution to a lasting victory against terrorism, not so much by offering its military resources, but by cleaning up its act in the Caucasus, by ending human rights abuses and prosecuting those who committed them in the past, and by pressing for a peaceful political solution with the moderate Chechen leadership. That would make a huge difference! And set a huge example.

Millions of moderate and peaceful Muslims around the world will consider our attitude with regard to Chechnya, the Middle East, and other conflicts where their fellow Muslims are involved, as a test of whether the West is sincere in its message of justice, equality and human rights, or whether it is all merely a charade, and we are ready to condone injustice in the name of our own interests. The stakes are enormous. We shall either win their trust, and with it the battle against the extremists, or fail, and sow the seeds of a new circle of despair, hatred, and violence.

Sometimes terrorism emerges in circumstances which no enlightened social or political action could prevent: as the Baader Meinhof in Germany, but, in the



main, throughout the world, it is the end-product of political or religious fanaticism, blending together, and always strengthened by grievance. The removal of grievance does not guarantee the disappearance of religious fanaticism which can and does appear and operate in advanced societies, but it seems to diminish its incidence. The removal of grievance normally has some direct political response and a relatively quick calming of extremes.

In this regard and here I speak personally and not as a representative of the Parliamentary Assembly, I believe that, in all the world, Palestine is a suppurating wound, feeding poison into international relations, as was most recently and sadly illustrated in Durban and, somehow, it must be cauterized. I use the word cauterized intentionally because I do not think the wound can be healed without some previous hurtful burning.

I take only a short instant of your time to say what I would do if I had the power. I would say to the Israelis that international force would guarantee their existence. But within internationally recognized borders. I would say to the Palestinians that international force would guarantee a free Palestinian state. I would say to both that a permanent UN police force would police the border between them. Perhaps this would not exclude cross-border violence entirely and it might also require facing up to the removal of settlements but it would give each a space of their own and time peacefully to develop and slowly to reach for a civilized relationship.

I do not see it as being possible to establish the level of international agreement needed to tackle terrorism without concerned action to remove the grievances upon which it feeds and without strengthening the international community's ability collectively to confront and deal with it.

However, in the pursuit of justice and in guaranteeing the security of ordinary citizens, we must not forget—as difficult as this may be for some to accept—that terrorists also have human rights. Our belief in that is what separates us from them. Against the background of the considerable differences that exist between the United States and Europe on some aspects of human rights, such as the death penalty, this consideration is important and risks having an impact on the efficiency of trans-Atlantic co-operation in the prosecution of terrorists.

The Council of Europe's response to the attacks in the United States was one of solidarity with the American people and support for its efforts to deal with the consequences of these awful attacks and to bring the perpetrators to justice.

The significance of this support is far from just symbolic: the Council has 43 member states—including all fifteen members of the European Union—and has over fifty years of experience in international legal co-operation, including in the field of law enforcement.

During its last part-session at the end of September, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe called on its member states governments to



review its 1978 European Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism, the main purpose of which is to make extradition easier. This should include the opening of the convention to Council of Europe observer states—of which the US is one—and non-member countries, and the removal of the right to make reservations, which can defeat the purpose of the Convention. The Assembly also recommended that the European Union arrest warrant, agreed last week in Brussels, be extended to all 43 Council of Europe member states.

In offering Council of Europe assistance and support, the Assembly firmly insisted on full respect for human rights, which includes its unconditional opposition to the death penalty.

While the controversy between the United States and Europe on the issue of capital punishment has not created any difficulties so far; suspects with alleged links to the attacks of 11 September are being arrested on a daily basis across Europe. This may change if the US requests their extradition.

In the aftermath of the horror they have had to live through, it might seem in rather poor taste to speak to Americans in a high moral tone on the death penalty. Yet today we have perhaps a better opportunity than ever before to reflect on this, together.

In many countries, not only in the United States, the threat of terrorism is one of the strongest arguments for retaining capital punishment. The three of the forty-three Council of Europe member states that have not yet formally abolished the death penalty: Armenia, Russia and Turkey, have all suffered from terrorism in the past. Recently, Turkey has adopted a broad constitutional reform which includes the abolition of the death penalty for all offences, except terrorism.

One can understand, even justify, such an attitude on an emotional level. But even if we leave aside the ethical objection, that killing people is simply wrong, the two main arguments in favour of the death penalty—that it acts as a punishment and a deterrence—do not survive rational scrutiny when it comes to fanatics ready to die for their cause.

Fanatical terrorists, be they driven by religion or ideology, are not concerned about their physical well-being. They are ready to put their lives at risk, and indeed to sacrifice them, in order to carry out their abominable deeds. What they do fear is political death, anonymity, and public oblivion.

Does anybody remember Ilich Ramírez Sánchez? Since his incarceration in the Santé prison in Paris, the main preoccupation of Carlos "the Jackal" has become not how to change the world order through violent means, but rather how to recover his socks from the prison laundry. He is hardly the image of a world-class terrorist, or an inspiration to would-be revolutionaries of this world.

For fanatical terrorists, physical death is not a punishment. On the contrary, the prospect of being put to death by the very government they fight against is an added bonus, guaranteeing instant martyrdom and a place of honour in the collective memory of those who share their fanatical views.



Executing fanatics not only gratifies them personally. I shall never forget that sneer on Timothy McVeigh's face; it also risks inciting others to follow their example.

What Osama bin Laden fears most is being locked away and forgotten. And this is what should happen to him and his like. They should spend the rest of their lives in prison. They should wake up and go to bed with the thought that they have lost their cause. That they are nobodies.

But Europe's reluctance to extradite persons accused of terrorist activities not only has an ethical and philosophic nature, there is also a legal obstacle.

In the 1989 case *Soering vs United Kingdom*, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the conditions in the US death rows went beyond the threshold of ill-treatment set by Article 3 of the European Convention of Human Rights, which says that nobody shall be subjected to torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

The Court therefore requested from the United Kingdom not to extradite Mr Soering without first receiving assurances from US prosecutors that he would not face the death penalty.

This is a decision no European court or government can ignore.

Before concluding, just a short reflection on the impact of what has taken place on the ordinary life we lead. I don't mean the air traveller who, though there are many, is a minority person and since the Munich exercise of Al Fatah has had and I suppose forever will have to be subjected to search. I mean the man and woman in the street, going to the supermarket, walking about, dropping into a restaurant. The reality is that we can't spend our lives looking over our shoulders.

So, unless we want our lives to be distorted and made miserable by the activities of what are, in the end, the activities of a few crazy people, we will go on and act normally. I remember the bombs in the Paris metro. Suddenly all the poubelles, rubbish bins, not just in Paris but throughout France, were closed. It lasted about a fortnight. People said where can I put things? And common sense triumphed. And the poubelles were opened. And have so remained.

We must not exaggerate the extent and level of threat and thereby give to "security" the right to push us about without reason, which many would happily do. I am in Budapest. It was the case here before. We don't want it back again!

In conclusion, I wish to offer an apology. If this speech came across as fragmented and incoherent, I have an excuse. In preparing for this conference, I lost precious time because of a bomb alert in the Palais de l'Europe in Strasbourg. There was nothing extremely dramatic in the incident, and the seventeen hundred members of the Secretariat calmly evacuated the building and gathered in the park opposite to it, waiting for the bomb experts of the French police to blow to pieces a piece of luggage left behind by a distracted visitor.

As President, I have some privileges, however dubious they may seem in this case. I did not evacuate, I was evacuated. My secretary came in and said "the



police have come to take you away". I have a clear conscience and I remained calm ... but they did! I was removed in a small car, at high speed, to a building some distance away.

Sitting there and waiting for the bomb experts, I had time to reflect on the sad change that has happened to the world we knew.

In retrospect, I try to look at this episode with humour, but it is a bitter kind of humour, because it is mixed with fear. It is not so much fear for my personal safety; I am, after all, reaching an age at which one can afford to have a "differentiated evaluation"—I can't escape the phrase! I'm sorry!—of physical risks. My fear is for the values I so strongly believe in and to which I have devoted my entire political life—the values of freedom and humanity.

The world has changed after 11 September. And, so far, it has not changed for the better. My values, our values, are under threat and we must defend them.

If, in facing terror, we give up on freedom and humanity, the terrorists have won. ❦



András Gerevich

# Diary

*Napló*

*For days now fighter planes have been circling above us:  
I stood in Riverside Park and scanned the sky,  
others jogged or walked dogs as they did every afternoon.*

*Each person was six thousand less. We were afraid  
of the day before yesterday, of the hatred painted  
on walls and on benches: "Kill all the Arabs!"*

*Black women in their forties wept through the morning Mass,  
and I sat in the pew alone, a stranger in the shared city,  
but the priest hugged me like an old friend when I left.*

*I spent the afternoon rambling, empty and dejected,  
past photocopied faces of those who were missing.  
The cars didn't move: people's minds too were in deep-freeze.*

*For two days I carried food and medicine, volunteered  
to save lives, but was sent home: the army took over.  
There was nothing to do, nowhere for me to go.*

*I was empty still, and helpless, I watched the TV,  
the same sequence several hundred times on the news,  
no-one said anything, they were busy counting the dead.*

*I understood this was no theme for writing. Time didn't pass.  
Just to keep busy, I went to the barber, went running and shopping  
visited the laundrette and gazed at the bright New York sky.*

*Translated by George Szirtes*

---

**András Gerevich**

*is 25, was born in Budapest but spent four years in Dublin as a child. His second volume of poems is due out soon. He is in the US on a Fulbright scholarship.*



Péter Esterházy  
Celestial Harmonies

(Excerpts from the novel)

BOOK TWO

Confessions of an Esterházy family

*"The characters of this adventurous biography are creatures of the imagination. They have character and authenticity only insofar as they exist within the pages of this book. They are not living characters, nor were they ever."*

CHAPTER ONE

1

**I**f you don't mind my saying so, Your Excellency, mam, the Communists are here." Old man Menyhért Tóth, Uncle Menyus to us, didn't so much say this as breathed it, or nodded it, as if he were hoping that if he didn't quite say it, maybe it wasn't true. What he saw, though, put even more fear in his heart—something he had never seen before, fear on his mistress's countenance. (Fear and Communists, everything here starts with them, and will end with them too.)

---

**Péter Esterházy,**

*a novelist, is an internationally acclaimed author, many of whose books have been translated into half a dozen languages. His latest book, Harmonia Cælestis (Budapest, Magvető, 2000), has been at the top of the bestseller list since its appearance in 2000. It is a seven-hundred-page semi-fictional biography of the historical family as well as of his parents and himself. It has recently appeared in German and French, and an English translation will be forthcoming this year from Ecco Books, New York.*



Grandmother was twenty-three at the time, a newlywed, a young woman, it's hard to imagine, even though I have no problem recognizing her in the yellowed photographs; I just have to discover my father's face in hers, and the two of them (the three of them, in fact, because my aunt, my father's sister) look like caricatures of each other; the self-same improbable forehead, a spacious, open terrain, a landscape worthy of lofty description, the wrinkles like ditches, the same curved, one might say hooked nose—it's a matter of taste, education and political climate, whether we think of it as a Roman or a Jewish profile—and the same ever-present squint, the persistent and enigmatic laughter in the eyes.

Still, though I identify this mostly badly dressed young woman ("your grandmother dressed with intrepid bad taste; on her, the sinfully expensive pieces of clothing screaming in anguish from each other's proximity found a safe haven of sorts"), whom I see in the formally posed traditional family photographs, or else, in contrast, the contrary, in clumsy, fortuitous "snapshots", sometimes with her younger sisters, each artfully framed by a window with a bouquet of wild flowers, beautiful, budding young women!, sometimes with her children and her husband, on the front stairs of the mansion, as the real though not titular head of the family, sometimes by the side of my handsome grandfather, emphatically as a supporting player, sometimes literally in the shadow of her mother-in-law (an ingenious photograph!), the indomitable Princess Schwarzenberg, some-other times with a rake, her sleeves rolled up, strong as a man, surrounded by frightened, awe-struck peasants; in vain, for in these photographs I see an unfamiliar relative, a stranger who is yet familiar, a cousin of sorts who, judging by the background, is living sixty years before she should be. I can only imagine my grandmother as an old woman, older than old. Not all grandmothers are like this, but she is (was). At any rate, that's how I see her.

An old woman all her life and—though she is never alone in the photographs, never!—on her own. On her own, but not lonely. Nobody *suits* her, neither children nor grownups, neither men nor women. She didn't need anyone by her side, and if there was someone there, it was of no consequence. As if it were raining, whereas it could just as easily be a sunny day.

Later on, I thought the same of my father. That there are people who don't need others. I, for one, am not like that, but he—for one—is. I was mistaken. Still, in almost every picture there's that easy aloofness, Kraus and Sons, Tata, Bildstelle Wachtl, Wien, Lerner Photo-Report Bureau, Ofotért State Studio, knickerbockers and more knickerbockers, Prince de Galles pattern, an organ pipe, he's standing next to his siblings in eyeglasses ordered from Simon Waldstein, as if he were in



a world apart, with no connections to his childhood, nor the war, and afterwards, really to nothing, a new, unfamiliar country; he's got nothing except us: really nothing. The Count of nothing.

4

In the photograph he's smoking, the cigarette hanging nonchalantly from the corner of his lips, like in those French films (black-and-white), the ubiquitous Worker, his whole face laughing, his eyes a bit off, bleary, as if he'd had too much to drink, though possibly he's just young, unfamiliarly young, in threadbare work-clothes, a much-worn, stained pullover, the background indistinct, possibly, he's leaning against an adobe wall, making a cocky Churchillian gesture for the sake of the camera. Could he be saying that regardless of what may come to pass—which afterwards did—we're invincible? Cocked jauntily to one side, like a military helmet, on his head a white enamelled chamber pot. A potty. A potty.

5

If my grandmother really was the type of person who had no need of anybody else, it follows that she had no need of my father either. What I mean is, she needed him all right, he being her first born, a family of our standing can't do without a first born, a boy, that goes without saying; of course, I know, I know perfectly well that in every family someone is always the first to be born, but not every family numbers them. First born, and a boy, that was my father, but there didn't seem to be much demand for him *personally*. Or so it seems. But at the time that Menyus Tóth, the *doyen* of the domestic servants, entered the white salon, presumably no one thought of this, neither my grandmother, nor my father, and as for me, well, neither did I. As for Menyhért Tóth, nobody's asking.

6

The white salon was named after the white Roisin furniture that grandmother Roisin, great-great-grandmother Roisin to me, my grandfather's grandmother (no: one down, my grandfather's grandfather's mother, my ancestress Marie Françoise Isabelle de Baudry, Marquise de Roisin and a legendary beauty, this just for the sake of the record; without the details, it's all so banal!) had brought with her from Paris. She was the confidante of Marie-Thérèse de France, the "Orphan of the Temple", daughter of King Louis XVI and granddaughter of Maria Theresa. In 1796, at the age of sixteen, the princess was let out of captivity, and until her marriage lived in Vienna under the protection of grandmother Roisin's aunt, the high stewardess Countess Chanclos. This is where they befriended each other. (We had a chinoiserie-patterned something, God only knows what to call it, at home, a sort of *secrètaire*, a small bureau with drawers—I saw some-



thing similar once at the court of the Spanish king, and I shouted, I know that piece!, which they didn't understand—our parents called it a *shancio*. This gave us much occasion for laughter, what a stupid name, but we called it a *shancio*, too. We were forbidden to touch it. Needless to say, we touched it when no one was looking. We played blind man. With our eyes closed we stroked it, feeling the pictures in the round, a Chinese landscape, pagoda, trees, birds, and the wide, yellow mountings on the sides. They were made of brass, or gold. We opted for gold.)

Roisin grandmother's father—I'd rather not go into how we are related; we're related—was put to death along with the royal family. He left a silk scarf behind that his daughter brought to this "far distant, dark, barbaric country", on it a brownish stain which his descendants said was blood. A scarf from the scaffold. *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*. Though in all that confusion, we may very well have stood on the other side. For generations the scarf was kept on the wall of the domestic chapel, which of all people, my grandmother took objection to on strict Catholic principles. Interestingly enough, it was her father-in-law, who was no less clerical in his convictions—something tells me he founded the Christian People's Party—it was he who would not hear of it, opting instead for the inviolability of tradition. French rationalism and nonchalance: this too played a hidden part in my great-grandfather's implacability.

I also inherited a white rococo sideboard. Beautiful. More than beautiful. What I mean is, it's at times like this that the brutality inherent in the beautiful manifests itself. The way it wreaks havoc. First and foremost, a beautiful object is not harmonious, but strong. A sideboard like this bursts a modern apartment at the seams. In order to accommodate a sideboard like this you need to build different houses, you have to change your life. My sideboard (like an unsolicited Rilke) speaks about this otherness, even though I packed the top full of books, magazines, sandwiches, or, in contrast, cleared everything off it, let the Carrara marble top gleam; surreptitiously, I may have even placed a silver candle-holder on it. But it didn't help. On the other hand, in my father's house which, as far as its spaces are concerned, is no different from my own, the situation is fundamentally different. There's a corner vitrine there from the same set, a piece no less spectacular, but it keeps mum, it doesn't rebel, like mine. I think I know why. My father's eyes, his glance, puts the white monster in its place, it places it in the past and in the personal.

I lack such a glance. I can produce it only if I close my eyes.

8

When Menyus Tóth entered the Roisin salon to announce that the Communists were here, Father gave Grandmother's belly a horrendous kick. Not to worry: from the inside.



The kicking of an expectant mother's belly by her infant from inside, that's legitimate kitsch: the belly—what's more, a bulging belly!; the cards stirring, in a version with more finesse, the winning card tumbling to the floor; touched to the quick, the paternal hand throbs in unison—there's no cheap anecdote that won't do the trick. From the other side, and in the spirit of the fourth commandment (of ten), it is (of course) to be frowned upon.

I am against it too, personally. True, I have hardly hit anyone in all my life. I could count the number of times on one hand. It'd hardly take more fingers than the usual five. Even if I were to add those I'd have liked to hit, and not just theoretically, like I'm going to do a fast *csárdás* on Big Huszár, or give Brezhnev a punch in the nose, but when overtaken with rage and humiliation, from which only one path seems to lead, when the muscles are strained to breaking point—even then the number isn't much greater. And, needless to say, I was never even close to hitting my mother or my father. Actually, yes, father once. But that was ages ago. Besides, he was smashed out of his skull, so it's like it wasn't him at all. It's not like that. When I slapped him—but no, it wasn't a slap, it was worse, it was kicking, the rough-and-tumble butting of heads, etcetera, and frozen in close-up, just like in a film, we stared each other down: no two ways about it, that was him and that was me. The fact that I was right confused me. Was.

15

The same thing happens to me that happens to everybody studying their family tree. I realize how little I know about my ancestors. But then we always know little about them, just the little we know, there's little we can discover about them, regardless of the particular family and the availability of documents; all that we can successfully discover every time is that our grandfather was a stern and dignified old gentleman with a goatee, and virtuous, his seven children are proof to that.

And there's another thing to consider... it's not like we simply conjure up the past, strolling inside it at leisure, taking an objective survey. It's not like that, because the present is always aggressive... submerging itself in the murky waters of the distant past only to surface with whatever will enhance its present shape. Possibly, I am not even conjuring up my past so much as devouring it, I— who am that I am now—making an exclusive claim: on myself.

To live is to make up a past for ourselves. (Saying, courtesy of grandfather.)

17

Thanks to my father's perfectly timed kick, Grandmother assumed that Menyus Tóth was saying that the Communists were in her belly. That's why the look of alarm. Besides, how did her servant know? "These people always know everything." Grandmother always knew her duty, and expected the same of others.



That's why she appeared to be on her own—because she belonged not to people, but to her duty. The other thing that set her apart from the human beings I knew was her implicit belief in God. She believed in the Lord, the way only people living hundreds of years ago could. How do I know? I don't.

18

I got a call once from a madman who started telling me that the Kádár regime settled inside his mother's womb, but I mustn't think he's a madman because of that.

"What an idea!"

He sounded pretty convincing. It wasn't the first time that the thought had occurred to me too, that a dictatorship must surely change the body, too—we end up growing two noses, or webs between our fingers. Actually, it wasn't inside his mother, but his father. His father's guts. That's why he joined the police. Fighting for the regime that ruined him. Because his father had sacrificed himself. And for what? For nothing. Because to join the police is a sacrifice, isn't that right, and not the traffic police, if you get my drift. I do, I said. He thought he was talking to my father, not a child.

"Why are you telling me this?"

Swearing like a stevedore, he slammed down the phone.

19

So then, my grandmother's first thought was of the Lord, because she always thought of Him first. Then of what she had to do. Which at the moment was kicking around inside her.

"Have you gone mad?! Menyus?!"

When grandmother was angry, there was no knowing whether she was asking a question or making a statement.

"Who are where?!"

Being reluctant to let the horrible word pass his lips yet again, the faithful servant merely waved an arm behind his back, making faces into the bargain. Grandmother nodded significantly.

"You really are mad. What a shame."

The faithful servant continued to shake his head, feverishly, with near annoyance, as if he were playing a game of twenty questions with his mistress, who was incapable of finding the right direction. The information was so preposterous, Grandmother lost no time in giving it credence. Even if poor Tóth had lost his senses, he can't be *that* mad. There are things we cannot conceive of, even if we let go of the hand of the rational. *The hand of the rational*, I heard this a lot afterwards.

She stepped over to the wide window. From here you could see the park that stretched into the distance in front of the chateau (or the back, there were various schools of thought on the subject contending with each other), for a



while meandering in place in front of the huge, unpleasantly neo-classical building, then surreptitiously and leisurely disappearing among the peaks of the Vértes. The mistress of the château was not my grandmother, but her mother-in-law, the "old Excellency", whom I was to meet later on, when we were forcibly resettled. That's where she died. For weeks before her death, she lay without moving. She had only one gesture left to her: if she had to yawn, she put her hand up to her lips; she kept this gesture until her death, the universal embarrassment.

My father's birth—because he's going to be born even though he's helplessly kicking around inside now like a crypto-Communist—brought Grandmother her independence when the family moved to the château at Majk, originally intended as a hunting lodge.

Grandmother was short on kindness. This made the tough even tougher, her requests sounded like orders, though her orders never turned into commands. On the other hand, her consistency made her actions calculable, reliable, and this, coupled with her natural willingness to help, at times gave the appearance of kindness, all the same.

Speaking of appearances, there was nothing aristocratic about her to the eye, even though both her parents were Károlyis ("your grandmother is impeccably Károlyi"), and also, as far as being short, she was short on any need for pleasure (she complied with the Victorian advice about love-making to "close your eyes and think of England" without any effort), she cared not a jot for beauty, she cared not a jot for good food, she was not in contact with the world of the senses, my grandmother didn't even have a body, except when she gave birth.

"Have you ever given birth, Menyus?"

Menyus turned red. He loved my grandmother very much, even though he had no inkling at the time that the second child, my father's younger brother, would be given the same name as his. Love is not the right word; he didn't dare love her; let's put it this way: he had emotional respect for her.

"Because I'm about to."

"No, you're not, Your Excellency, you're not going into labour yet."

"Then what would you say I'm doing?!"

"You are talking to me." And he turned red again. "I'm sorry, but you mustn't go into labour now, it's not the time." And he pointed behind him once again, but this time with his head, like when they're pulling the bit on a horse. Grandmother gave an impatient wave of the hand.

"What have you got against the Communists anyway?"

"Me, Your Excellency?" said the abashed valet. He wanted to say that they're not talking about him now, but he kept mum, because they never talked about him. I wouldn't be surprised if at the bottom of her heart my grandmother were a Communist. One thing is for sure; in every sphere of life, she strove for equality. But no, this may be misleading; my grandmother was no revolutionary, she was a lady of rank, but she judged people by the same standard. She probably



didn't think that existence determines consciousness. Of course, if existence does determine consciousness, she couldn't have thought this to begin with.

"Menyus," grandmother said, thereby putting an end to this highly irregular chat, "go and have the carriage harnessed so I can be in time for the express to Tata. And stop that ridiculous pointing. As for you, son," she put in severely for the benefit of my infant father, "you will have to wait," though actually, she said what Faust said to the moment of his happiness, to wit, tarry, my son, tarry, it is better for you inside, and pushing her bulging belly before her, she made her way out of the Roisin salon.

20

My father did as he was told and stayed inside the pleasant darkness for yet another week or so. The last peaceful week of his life. The last week of freedom. He waited for them to declare the glorious Republic of Councils...

His life set off with more complications than our family is used to. A new Esterházy life slips into this world as effortlessly as if everything and everyone had been waiting just for this, as if there had been a void in nature, a hole, a deficit, a no waiting for a yes, a wound—a light scrape—, which, just like the new shoot, appears, as if from the heavens, softly, unaccompanied by pain, healed. Order is restored. The serfs dance by the bright light of the bonfires, in the palace, palaces, cut crystal glasses clink against each other; priestly hands, chaplains' hands and bishops' hands are clasped in prayers of thanksgiving.

The way new films were advertised in the cinemas: Coming! Coming! Coming! How much attention and attentiveness, work and planning preceded the new arrival! They were concerned for the newcomer, and they were concerned for themselves, and so midwives, barber-surgeons, nannies, priests and, last but not least, lawyers crowded around the event in droves. This time, though, there were no droves.

It being a turning point of epic proportions, I heard it said many times and also read in the family records that my father was the first Esterházy for centuries to be born without rank and means. Without rank and means, the family kept saying with obvious relish, with pride if not outright *hauteur*: see?, we even managed this, not only are we replete with rank and means, one of us even managed the opposite. Of course, they said this only *afterwards*; they thought back on these few official days as a joke that was past its time, a historical scherzo. They had no idea at the time how easily one can get used to such jokes, how well we'd fare without rank and means, that my father was simply the first of a long line. His ruffled swaddling-clothes marked the end, the end of the afore-mentioned centuries, except no one knew this at the time. The finality of the last moment is seen for what it is only from the vantage point of the moment after the last, and thus by definition, too late.



When in May 1951 the forced resettlements started in Budapest, my parents took it all in stride; there was no need to worry or be unduly alarmed; it was just the usual thing all over again; if all is lost, there is nothing to lose, which is a freedom of sorts. But at the very least, it gives you the illusion of freedom. Though I hadn't lost anything yet personally, I was not worried either, nor unduly alarmed, because I thought—and what else could I have thought?— that this was the way of the world, it's what life is all about, they come and drag you screaming from your crib, strangers come, scream at you, packing, scurrying about, the dark of night, a truck, the gasoline fumes; then more strangers, more screaming, my father's impassive countenance, mother's tears, then the tears stop, she does not cry any more, or only rarely, and if this is the natural way of the world, what's the use of worrying or feeling alarmed?

I had no idea when I first laid eyes on it that Budapest was the city of fear. Fear held my native city in thrall, there was nothing but this fear, the winding Castle streets, the promenades, the foul outskirts and elegant avenues ("the avenues that once bore the name of your uncles"), everything; with its "hideous, colossal, festering ass" fear and trembling had settled over the city. My crib offered a spectacular view of Blood Meadow and the Castle. A choice spot. My first home was a villa in Buda situated on a steep lot, as if the house had grown out of the ground not far from the steps named after our King Csaba, on the side of the hill that bore the name of the ill-fated traitor Martinovics.

After the convent where they had been given room and board, and which, unless I'm much mistaken, was financed by us, the family, was closed down, great-grandmother Schwarzenberg and Aunt Mia also came to live with us. The ubiquitous dark glasses that Aunt Mia wore enhanced, rather than hid, her beauty. A famous actress trying to hide. Like that. Yet there was nothing of the actress in her, and her beauty, too, had faded (or always had been faded, which is a contradiction, of course); no man ever spoke to her as a man; the only bond of affection she held was for her brother, my grandfather; she wanted to devote her life to him, but he wouldn't have it. Wouldn't hear of it. Entering a convent seemed the logical thing to do, but she didn't want to dedicate herself even to Christ, either as his servant or betrothed; she didn't have enough warmth of heart even for that. Which left pecuniary support. In her desperation Aunt Mia attempted to hide her lack of warmth, hide it behind kindness. To no avail. Whereupon equally desperate, we, children, did everything to reassure her that we loved her. Our mutual desperations were a fine match for each other, I think. On the other hand, she had the softest hands in the whole wide world. Like a weak little bird's, we took hold of her hands; she did not object, and we slid it up and down our cheeks. Meanwhile, she was supposed to be teaching us German.



For a long time I was under the impression that the evil piece of paper that arrived on June 16 1951 asking us if we would kindly oblige the authorities by getting the hell out of our home in twenty-four hours and showing up at our newly designated place of residence, which brought with it not only the moral benefit of teaching the enemy of the people, that being yours truly (the eviction papers were accidentally addressed to me, but my parents pretended not to notice) a lesson, but a more practical benefit as well, since it made a pleasant apartment free and available, concretely for the people, and more concretely, for Comrade J.G., may the pox take him.

In short, everyone stood to benefit; we regained our moral balance, while the people, etc., etc.

June 16th is the correct date, but so is July 16th, it being the last day of evictions. The very last. Which means that they dangled a carrot in front of my parents' nose, as a result of which the worst that could happen in a dictatorship happened: they started hoping.

But this never happened again.

My mother was brought up with an eye to practicality. Granny put the girls to work. They learned to cook early on, and though cleaning was the servants' job, for half a year they had to see to it ("you must learn, dear, what to expect of the staff"), household chores plus culture, religion and public education, with a bit of dancing thrown in, they knew everything young ladies of breeding were expected to know.

Father, too, was brought up for the same thing, for life. Except, they were brought up for a different sort of life; being forcibly resettled was simply not conceivable to either as a possible life-style. Their upbringing did not contradict the view that this was the best of all possible worlds, it's just that they never thought that what came to pass could be possible.

If anything saved my mother, it was not her education, nor her steadfastness, nor her fortitude or sense of responsibility, but her innate sense of good taste, the refinement she was born with and which she regarded as part of creation—and which she insisted on forever after with effortless ease and single-mindedness of purpose. Respect for form prevailed even in Bogykó—and it worked fine for some time—but this refinement lacked the individual touch. My beautiful aunt was not much for hype, exercising caution in all things, even in her truly breathtaking beauty. Life gave Mother a tranquil life, but that was hers lock, stock, and barrel.

These are her own napkins, her place mats painted with her own two hands, her seating cards, her hand-written menus (the legendary cardboard menu cards



from the very bottom of life, elegant, and in French, Hort, 26.4.1951, Grandfather's banquet for his 70th birthday, on the veranda, *carré de porc rôti*, because Aunt Rozi got us pork from an illegal butchering; and the horrid bull's blood, the Château Torro Rosso!), her unobtrusive, refined way of speaking—these saved the family from a decline of sorts. Which is an understatement. (It saved it from nothing.) Father took all this in stride. Having been surrounded by refinement all his life, he couldn't care less. Couldn't appreciate it. Didn't even notice it. He regarded my mother's ambition, the forthright individuality of her refinement, with mistrust. Had he a grain of pride in him, it would have been with condescension.

My father never looked down on anyone, that's how he was an aristocrat. My grandfather looked down on everyone, that was *his* way of being an aristocrat.

As for me, I just keep blinking.

138

The proletarian dictatorship intended forcible resettlement as a cunning move which would make the peasantry allied to the working class loathe the rotten to the core ruling class which had oppressed it for centuries even more, at long last, as prescribed by regulation, but the move backfired.

On the contrary. They were overcome by a feeling of undifferentiated solidarity. ("Go kneel in the second pew countin' from the confessional, you'll find something there, for a quick Lord's Prayer." "You never ate so much chicken in your lives, simpletons, as back then.") For instance, without thinking twice about it, they blamed the awkward circumstance of having to put up with strangers living under one roof with them on the Communists, or saw it as an honour.

As a result, they gave us their best room, the so-called clean room, whereas theoretically we should have lived (atoned for our sins) in the shed attached to the house, a shed that was full of chicken shit and resisted any attempt at heating. Indeed, when the inspector showed up, he did not neglect to mention the fact.

"There's plenty 'a room all around," Uncle Pista said, and avoided looking the man from the council in the eye.

"Have it your way, Simon," the young man retorted impertinently, "but beware of the consequences!"

These people couldn't get a sentence out edgewise without making it sound like a threat. Pass the salt. I have a headache. It's your turn to take the boy to school today. Your uncle was shot today. However, this was more a matter of habit than outright malice, because in fact they did intimidate people all the time, regardless of what they were saying, thinking, or the lies they were telling. That's dictatorship: the certainty of intimidation and the certainty of fear, i + f,



intimidation plus fear, that's dictatorship for you, but not like one half of the nation intimidating the other half, or the powers that be intimidating everyone, because there's something contingent upon all this, a howling, terrifying uncertainty, for the one who is intimidating is also afraid, and the one being intimidated intimidates others in turn, the strictly delineated roles are obscured to the outer limits, everyone intimidates and everyone fears, and all the time there are executioners and there are victims, and the two are clearly distinguishable, the one from the other.

There was a time when seven of us had to make do—and so we made do—with the spacious twenty-five square metres of the “clean” room. Using a grey blanket, we divided the room in two, with the realm in the back, beyond the blanket (beyond the Seven Seas) being grandfather's, the whole thing, and his alone, which everyone seemed to think was only fair. So did he. I'm not sure Mother did, but she was afraid to say so. Grandfather was not a man to be defied. (Of course, that depends on what we mean by defied, because human defiance on a grand scale cannot be checked.)

Uncle Pista Simon and family (including defiant Aunt Rozi) were afraid even to address him. To address words to him. Whereas compared to his usual self, grandfather had turned into a warm hearted, kind old gentleman. When he engaged his “hosts” in conversation, sticking to factual, general subjects on agriculture, they ran away, bashfully hiding their faces. Grandfather shook his head, he never did figure out what he'd done wrong.

Everyone called Mother by her first name. They didn't think of her as a gentleman or gentlewoman, not even a lady (though that she was, as far as that went), but first and foremost, as a mother. To prove the point, there I was, wailing; besides, by then she was carrying my younger brother, or else was in a blessed state, it was too early to determine which. My father they just called Professor. Uncle Pista opted for Count, but Father talked him out of it. The old man chewed this over, then smiled. Fine.

“What are you laughing at, Pista, old friend?”

“Nothing, Professor.” And Pista winked at the word ‘professor’.

“Only a fool would laugh at nothing, ain't that true, Pista, old friend?”

“That's very true, Professor.” Whereupon another wink followed.

“Something must've gotten in your eye, old friend,” father said pointedly, whereupon a silence ensued. “So then, old friend, tell us what that nothing's supposed to be, or else ... Get my drift?”

The old man let out a chuckle and quickly brought his hand up to hide his lips.

“Sure, sure... Professor.”

They talked as if they were afraid of being overheard. Uncle Pista circled round and round what he would not say, and enjoyed it, while father, as if he were stuck inside an old Transylvanian ballad, tried his hand at some imaginary peasant tongue, talking the way people used to talk when they told jokes about



the Széklers in Pest. Meanwhile, the old kulak laughed up his sleeve, thinking he'd gotten the better of the secret police, because even though he said professor, he was thinking count.

"Besides, seeing how we all feel the same way in the village," and he winking again, "we *all* say professor, in which case this professor also means count, but they can't have nothin' on us, 'cause we all say professor!"

On a purely linguistic plane Uncle Pista was right—the faultless implementation of a good thought—they can't have anything on you. Later on, though, it became evident to all concerned that they can always have something on you, and do have *something* on you. Uncle Pista, too, was soon arrested on some fabricated charge, not that a dictatorship needs fabricated charges, or only rarely; what they need is fabricated laws, the kind that can't be adhered to, and who decides whether they're being adhered to or not? What impressive scope for action!

He was behind bars for a year. When he was released, he was no longer laughing. He was weeping.

"Look what they done to me, Professor" he said, holding his hands up to my father. My father saw nothing out of the ordinary. Nice, strong peasant hands. "They're white, Professor, *white!* I can't bear the shame!"

Uncle Pista hadn't worked for a year, and his hands looked it, this is what he was showing my father, this shame. By then my father had proper, tanned, rough, muscular hands. His fingers were so strong, you could use them for a swing. We held on to his index finger—our hands could hardly encircle it—as he swung us back and forth.

My brother was born in September. People came to look at him. He had the biggest head on him you ever saw. It came with him. Then in December, at the age of ninety, Great-grandmother died.

She had a silver walking stick with a hippopotamus head (Uncle Charlie brought it from Africa, or so they said, along with his chronic scrofulous conjunctivitis, both a gift from some minor king); when she tapped it, we had to run to her and kneel, or whatever. She used to sit on a throne-like chair, and we had to kiss her hand.

"Stop pawing me, I'm not dying."

In the end, she got a stroke. She was conscious of what was going on around her, and she understood what we were saying, but the line of communication between her thoughts and her words had been severed. She tried her best, though. One day at lunch she looks at me and says, "Pass me the salt." I pass the salt, her face is drenched in sweat, her trembling hand begins to gesticulate, her eyes fill with tears, and she keeps saying, "Not that! The salt! The salt!"

I was filled with terror and pity and, bewildered, glanced at Aunt Mia, who looked after Great-grandmother. Biting her pale lips, Aunt Mia first stared into space, then at the others, who were shifting uncomfortably in their seats, and passed the toothpicks, the paprika and the soup tureen.



"Not that! The salt! The salt!"

At which, stupid and tactless as I was, instead of crying, my tears gave way to laughter.

"*Mistvieh!*" Aunt Mia shouted at me, "*Schweinehund! Marsch hinaus!*"

For days afterwards I wouldn't look anyone in the eye, and resented Aunt Mia more than anything in the world, because she was right. Ever since, mourning and tragedy brings laughter instead of tears. Who knows. Maybe it's some sort of atavism. For all I know, I might be descended from a tribe that weeps when they're happy, and laugh when something ails them. I'm never as merry and high spirited as when I'm low.

Later, Great-grandmother stopped talking altogether. She didn't even say salt. When a shadow fell over her, she let out a short yelp, and someone would move her chair into the sun. By the afternoon she'd progress from the brick-floored verandah onto the soil in the yard. The soil doesn't respond to tapping. Great-grandmother couldn't tap with her stick any more. This is what killed her, I think, that her power over others had irrevocably gone. What will become of the Czechs now? And the crown? Dad will see to it. He hasn't much time, of course. He leaves in the early morning, and when he comes back home, he's exhausted and sits on the porch, or verandah, he sits in the dark of night alone, just sits there, with no one daring to talk to him, not even Grandfather. Only my mother. He's as lonely as a king weighed down by the pressing problems of the realm, yet for all that he seems to be a king who is a subject, too, and this sort of thing takes the wind out of a king's sails. Then he abruptly springs to his feet, the hens, like so many frightened courtiers, scurry off, his ermine robe sweeps along the cool stone of the porch, and by the time he reaches his bed, he's fast asleep.

At times, he fell asleep even before I did. Which filled me with pride.

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The grownups in our family got used to doing manual labour in no time. It turned out that they were up to it, and they wanted to do it, too. Most of the people from Pest were of a different opinion. They took offence, because they'd been offended, and as for manual labour, they looked down on it. My father, as I said, looked down on nothing.

By day two, people could sign up as unskilled labourers with the church construction crew. Interesting that they allowed it back then, the building of the church. The parish priest was expecting my father and asked him in for a chat, offered him a drink, and attempted to talk him out of the lowly task of mixing mortar, at which sly as a fox, stalking his prey—for he enjoyed such games—my father posed the rhetorical question, to wit, whether there could be said to be a difference between one sort of work and another if it served the Lord, and whether he, as a member of his family, was not duty bound to carry on what his



forebears (not ancestors, mind, but forebears) had done for centuries before him, and come to the aid of the Church, if as a palatine, then as a palatine, if as an unskilled labourer, then as an unskilled labourer. The reverend found this line of reasoning noble, indeed, as well as incontrovertible, and so they drank another round of brandy.

Afterwards they rented a piece of land fifty-fifty on Andris's hill and at the Keller estate. Hoeing potatoes. ("You're a mighty handsome woman. Your backside's ample enough for planting two rows of potatoes.") They looked soused from exhaustion as they tottered home. Palms cracked, the skin in shreds, in spots scraped down to the flesh, but at least this was tangible, an injury that could be understood, that made sense. But what was this thing that goes beyond fatigue and exhaustion, what is this crushing defeat in the body, the feeling that there is nothing but the body, and that you're one with your body, your pain, your despair, what is this?

"It's called work," Aunt Rozi said to the kitchen stove, as she always did.

My father continued pressing his back dramatically, like an old woman.

"Oh, oh, it's killing me!" And he attempted a laugh.

Aunt Rozi did not turn around; as always, she was always busy over the stove, for there was always something to keep her busy over the stove.

"You'll survive," she said, like one who knew.

"What did you say, Aunt Rozi?" my father said sharply, for he had no liking for conflict and always tried to avoid it or smooth things over.

"All I said, Count, sir, is that hoeing potatoes won't kill you, sir."

"Hush, now," Uncle Pista said, hushing her with typical male cowardice.

"Don't you hush me, what're you hushing me for?"

To me, Aunt Rozi was an old woman, she must have been around fifty, a peasant woman who wore her hair up in a bun, obese, with layers of under-skirts. Her cheeks were shiny with anger. As for her eyes, they always sparkled, which added a certain beauty to her, but be that as it may, it certainly set her apart.

"If it's count, then it's count. It's count. What do you want from me?! Professor this and professor that, who're you kidding? Yourself? Him? Or the ÁVÓ?"

She spoke the Palots dialect, which became my mother tongue, too, ÁVÓ, awh-oooh, it sounded like a bark, a pained whimper.

"A count,"—and at this juncture she jerked her head and shot a glance at my father as if to confirm that she was telling the truth—"a count's got no business raking." Or did she turn just at this point? "Raking ain't for gentfolk."

Silence fell over the kitchen. It was tantamount to saying that my father's family had no business being there. My father stood around troubled; there was no one to argue with; there was nothing to say.

"Now, now, Rozi dear," Uncle Pista said trying to set things right, "the Professor and his family, they're not... they're not..." And he fell silent.



"They're not *what?!*" Aunt Rozi pounced on him, as if my father and mother weren't even there. In tears, Mother ran out to the clean room, it was full of people (us), at which she ran out again, out to the yard, and the garden beyond. Frightened, Uncle Pista toddled in place, like someone practising a dance step (beginners' course), while unperturbed, Aunt Rozi watched the young woman ran amok.

"What's the problem, Aunt Rozi?" my father piped.

"Nothing," Aunt Rozi said turning back to her stove, "what makes you think there's a problem, Count?"

Again, there was nothing for him to say.

For over a week they didn't speak to each other, except in greeting. (Not even Uncle Pista!) At sunrise, my father would go out to the potato patch with the others, at sundown they dragged themselves back, they wrapped their hands in rags, like lepers, Mother pushing her bulging belly before her, cooking all sorts of horrible *stuff* in the summer kitchen outside, she hadn't yet mastered the art of cooking a meal from nothing (she would!), in the morning they said hello and in the evening they said hello, but never asked for help, and never got any. Obviously, this couldn't go on much longer, but my parents were young, and in a certain sense spoiled, they thought their strength would hold out indefinitely.

Then one night, when my father reeled into the kitchen, Aunt Rozi said to the stove, "You're hoeing too fast, Professor."

"It needs to be done slower?"

"The point isn't slower. It's the rhythm. In keeping with your heart-beat, Professor." And a crimson fire flared up on her cheeks.

From then on, she helped every way she could—how to hold the rake, how to wind the foot-rag round the foot, what needs raking, what needs just a thinning out, what's a flat spade, and how to tell if a goose is fat (there's a protrusion under its wing, in the "armpit", and not till then!), how to make corn mash. And pupora.

"You can make food out of anything, Lilike, and like it. Take it from me. I know." Aunt Rozi said this with a certain desperation, and her eyes sparkled something fierce.

For instance, there was the case of the poppy-seed noodles. I was supposed to love them. They were supposed to keep body and soul together, or whatnot.

"I'll masticate some poppy-seed noodles for the child, Lilike."

Lilike thanked her. She had no idea what mastication was. My father had, but he wouldn't say.

"Will you tell me, Aunt Rozi, what masticating is? Will you show me how, Aunt Rozi?"

"Masticating is masticating, what's there to show?"

But she showed her just the same. She stuck out her tongue like an oven-



peel, as if she were sticking her tongue out at Mother, though she was just trying to show her the progress she was making.

"Lots of saliva; Lilike, that's the secret. That'll make it nice and soft and silky. See how silky this mastication is, Lilike?"

Like a countess to the title born (which she wasn't), my mother fainted dead away. Her one and only son and this revolting, dark (the poppy-seed!), gooey pulp of saliva?! Father wrapped her in his arms and smiling (what the heck, he was laughing for all he was worth) removed her from the kitchen—a socialist Gregory Peck.

Later my mother became a masticator to be reckoned with herself.

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Our bread ration, belonging to the lowest cast, intellectual plus class enemy, was just two hundred and fifty grams, and even then, only after the rest of the people got theirs. Sometimes I went with Grandfather. I held his hand. He was always smoking a pipe. We went to the back of the line and stayed there, because if anyone came, they'd get in front of us. If they didn't, Mrs Kenderesi, the loud-mouthed shopkeeper, comrade shopkeeper and wife of the council president, was there to remind him.

"Those from Pest move to the back!" At which we ended up in the back of the line once again. We had to wait even if the line was gone, partly because they couldn't tell us any more to move to the back of the line, and partly because someone might still show up who was more deserving of the bread than us, and just about everyone was considered more deserving.

The smell of bread, its fragrance, is heavenly, and so me and my younger brother didn't agree with our classification; my younger brother didn't consider himself a citizen of Pest; he was born in Gyöngyös, and had never crossed the village boundaries. (Once Bogyica sneaked him up to Pest, but no one knew that here—what clearer indication of the movement of the wheel of history, a wheel which, as we know, cannot be turned back—the progression in our places of birth: Budapest, Gyöngyös, Budapest). As for me, I insisted on the Lord's Prayer and demanded our daily bread. We howled. The mixed run of customers in the general-goods store listened to our concert with mixed emotions.

"Let them eat biscuits!" Mrs. Kenderesi finally yelled at the shop assistant, which prompted Grandfather to compose a brief essay in which he provided a short outline of history as such, followed—or possibly forming a part of said outline—by a parallel between Marie Antoinette's cake ("If you're short of bread, eat cake!") and Mrs Kenderesi's biscuits, back then brioches, today cakes, but now as then, bread being in short supply; in the evening he read it out to us but no one listened, a fact that grandfather noted with satisfaction; on the one hand, he pretended not to notice, on the other, it confirmed him in his scepticism *vis-*



*à-vis* the world, and the following day he hastened to send a copy of the essay to the "nearby imprisoned" (*epitethon ornans*), Károly Rassay, a former political associate and who in turn sent him an enlightened, detailed and encouraging response. They corresponded on a regular basis; like two chess players, they analysed past political situations (would Imrédy have fallen if in 1939 grandfather's friend had not produced documents proving that Imrédy was partly of Jewish descent), critically and self-critically, in the minutest detail, taking into account obscure facts known only to them. In order to confound the authorities, they wrote under pseudonyms. Good show.

Mrs Kenderesi, that old bag, cheated as well. When she put the bread on the scales, the wrapping paper hung down the side where she thought no one would see, then she put her weight on the paper and pulled on it, so you were lucky if you got half of what was coming to you, i.e., half a kilo instead of 1, 1 kilo instead of 2, etc., and nobody would say anything, because she was the council chairman's wife. There were as many Rákosi and Stalin pictures on the walls of the shop as Virgin Marys and Sacred Hearts.

"She used to kneel in St Joseph's Chapel, rattling her rosaries and panting like a martyred virgin. Now it's Party headquarters. The old bitch!"

My mother knew that Mrs Kenderesi was the council chairman's wife, but she did not know what it meant to be council chairman, or what it meant to be his wife. The first time she came back from the shop, she started shouting even before she got to the house, "Aunt Rozi! Aunt Rozi! Is this supposed to be a kilo? Is this pittance a kilo?"

Aunt Rozi turned to her kitchen stove.

"Half a kilo, Lilike, half a kilo."

Mother insisted on using the scales.

"What for, Lilike?"

Lilike wanted to weigh the bread. It was 540 grams.

"Do you see? Do you see?"

"I see."

At which there was again nothing to say.

When next my mother stood in line and Mrs Kenderesi was weighing out the half-a-kilo kilo for Annu Arany, she put a piece of newspaper on the scales, poured the flour on top from a large sack, sifting it, sifting it, here you are, a kilo of flour, at which Mother called from the back that she has her doubts, that kilo seems mighty lean to her.

Mrs Kenderesi turned purple. She was outraged. She turned on mother.

"Are you accusing me? You of all people are accusing me?"

"Oh, my dear, sweet Comrade Kenderesi, how can you think such a thing?" Ingratiating as a bag of fleas, Mother was. "It's just that when you turned around just now, there was an awkward moment, if you please,"—this must have been the only time in Mother's life when she used this phrase, and did so



with relish!—"when you inadvertently tipped the scales with your hips, but what am I saying, it was the newspaper."

The women continued to wait in line quietly, they couldn't understand this thin woman from Pest, what she was up to. They stared into space. Not so Annu Arany, who glanced proudly at Mother.

"God forbid I should accuse you," Mother said with emphasis on the word God, and how clearly it rang out stripped of its immediate context!; "God forbid, Mrs Comrade Kenderesi, Comrade Kenderesi's wife... oh, dear me, and isn't that your money on the floor?"

Mrs Kenderesi quickly stepped back, whereupon the tongue of the scale swung out.

"What money are you talking about?" she asked, then she glanced up at mother, and understood what was going on. Mother smiled.

"Oh, dear, how shadows do deceive one," Mother said, smiling as she looked at the scales. The weighing was far from exact. The tongue was hovering just over the half-a-kilo mark.

"These scales give me no end of trouble," said Mrs Comrade Kenderesi.

"I can imagine," mother said.

"But my conscience is clear."

"No doubt. Your reputation is well known throughout these parts."

"I try to be a good Communist."

"Try? The Lord..."—short pause—"knows I speak the truth, you don't have to try, dear, everyone knows you have a heart of gold. In fact, I was just wondering whether there might not be in this morally irreproachable shop some morally irreproachable sweets for these morally irreproachable children."

"I'm no millionaire, you know, but here, take them."

"May God bless you, Mrs. Comrade Kenderesi! You're the living proof of the strength of democracy. As a matter of fact, I was just thinking... I know it's asking a lot... but could you give me some cigarettes as well?"

"No. I can't. Giving away luxury items, that's not what I'm here for."

"Wouldn't you reconsider, mam, in which case, I assure you, your generosity, which rests on such strong principles, will weigh heavily in the balance... what I mean to say, the scales."

"Okay, fine. Take the cigarettes. But this is the last time!"

"May God bless you, and I can't tell you how sorry I am that those nasty scales are giving you so much trouble."

"A lady does not smoke on the street," Mother said laughing to Annu out on the street, and coughing, took a deep drag on her cigarette. By the time they reached home, Aunt Rozi had heard all about it.

"You should be more careful in future, Lilike."

"Thank you," Mother said smiling triumphantly, "I'll be careful." But she wasn't.



Sitting and playing keepie-uppies with a chestnut (football jargon: keeping the ball in the air with short, repeated kicks)—no one in school was as good at it as me. Standing was another matter. But sitting down, definitely. By miles. I don't know why. Even my shin-bone had a thing for anything round. Be that as it may, all I had to do was keep my leg up, with my foot flexed, of course, like a Lepeshinskaya, let the ball or chestnut fall on it, either bare or with the shell still on, and it pretty much started bouncing on its own.

I played for small stakes, and never for money but for milk, poppy-seed rolls, hot chocolate, whatever I needed just then (in the summer, down by Lake Balaton, at the friendly beach games, it was spinach, but no meat). I didn't win all the time, but mostly I did. I sat by the wall on the bench during the main recess, and waited for "clients". Young Huszár was my secretary, which was a post requiring great tact and expertise, because he chose or drummed up volunteers, agreed on the terms, which in the case of those in the classes above was usually a tricky business; it was a confidential post, he had to keep to the mutually agreed upon principles, namely, that it's the game that counts, not the result, and still, we must keep our heads and not be our own enemy, etc. Like a spider, I sat and waited.

There was another difficulty. It seemed expedient to keep the financial rewards of our little game hidden from our teachers. Business was seen to by Young Huszár, for which he received 40 per cent of the proceeds, a reasonable sum, if you ask me. At first, the 40 per cent put a strain on our relationship, but I didn't notice; for one thing, Little Huszár didn't know what 40 per cent meant, and when I said four out of ten, he looked at me with genuine bewilderment and confusion, why four, why *four* exactly, and what has four to do with forty. Besides, he wanted half. However, I didn't think this was fair; I was motivated not by pecuniary gain but the recognition of my own know-how. Also, practically speaking, forty per cent is nearly half.

I wouldn't want you to get the wrong idea, though. Young Huszár, Huszi, was neither my orderly nor my servant; our relationship had nothing of the master-servant about it; two equals brought their know-how into the business, the major difference being that I was sitting while he was standing, which goes without saying. If I had been as good at keeping the chestnut in the air standing up, I'd have also been standing, which also goes without saying.

And so, in the early nineteen-sixties I sat around in the schoolyard during the long break, by the base of the stone fence, with no thought to Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev's mounting problems, the nature of which were wheat plus the Chinese, when a long, black shadow fell over me, a soft, autumnal shadow cast by Big Huszár; and right away I knew that I was about to experience mounting problems of my own, except I was in the dark about their nature.



Big Huszár brought fear and trembling to the heart of students and faculty alike, plus Young Huszár. Plus me, which goes without saying. He was wild, unruly and unpredictable, blood-thirsty, dumb as a cow, but also infernally cunning, strong and intractable. He had failed three times already, so just like mom and dad, he had nothing to lose either.

In short, Big Huszár was a free man. Which is not all to the good when you're in general school. His facial hair was growing out, he drank, he skipped classes (without an excuse, no less!); at such times he was supposed to be working, loading coal carts at the Southern Railway Station; his parents were divorced but shared an apartment; his mother drank like a stevedore (I knew her, Aunt Ilike, thin and mummy-like, as if someone had pulled the dark-brown skin over her head like a stocking that was too small for her; she greeted me in a deep drawl that surprised me, and with a courtesy that was somehow strange and unjustified, good day, son, and bowed her head, as if I were not just a child); and when they ran out of money, Big Huszár had to pitch in. But at the time the only thing you could see from all this was that Big Huszár was an animal.

For fifty fillérs he'd eat a fly, for one forint you could take a picture of the cadaver on his tongue, for five forints and an apple (Starking), he'd bite a mouse in half. He never worked with outsourced mice, he liked to catch them himself.

I was frightened, but I did not stand up. Main recess was mine, and the chestnut, and the keepie-uppies; it belonged to me and Young Huszár, who was standing to the side, but without being sufficiently frightened—and something he'd never done in my presence before, he was dribbling a chestnut. Interesting. Only now did I see how alike they were. Big Huszár did the talking, as if he were Young Huszár's private secretary. I should have found a secretary for myself, too, but couldn't, and this proved fatal.

The problem, basically, was not the 40 per cent, but what the 40 per cent was 40 per cent of. Because what right have I got stopping his younger brother, curbing him, why don't I give free rein to his many and varied ideas, like the dribble auction, which could be run like a betting office, and in no time at all, prices would rocket to the starry skies.

"The Great Bear, The Evening Star," he added, threateningly.

I didn't know what he was driving at, honest I didn't. What prices? And why would they rocket sky-high? Also, what would they do once they got there?

"You're a moron," Big Huszár said with a resigned nod of the head. It wasn't even worth his while beating me up. Still, he was definitely after something. I shook my head with conviction. I saw no reason to consider myself a moron. Well, I am, and a colossal one at that, throwing good money out the window like this, with both hands. My ability to take imagery literally I had discovered early on, and so now I could think only of my two hands, in the act of throwing, twins, obviously, going from client to client, throwing the money out. The window. Not a bad career. Profession: two-fists.



Young Huszár's expression was a blank to me, I could read nothing off it, especially nothing encouraging. Still, I said to him, not to his brother that it's a game.

"And an asshole, too," his brother shouted, and he caught the thorny chestnut in mid-air like a tennis ball, squeezing it with his bare hand. I winced. "What do you mean, a game?!"

I don't think he was expecting an answer, but he got one anyway. I had done a considerable amount of thinking about games, I had to; about the tension, i.e., that everyone considers a game an unserious business, inferior, *nothing but a game*, whereas my experience told me just the opposite. I was practically always playing, because I was either playing soccer, or I was reading. I became fully submerged in the world of the book, though I rarely identified with any of the characters; I never aspired to be Gergő Bornemissza from *The Stars of Eger*, or Vicuska, or Boka, or Nemeček, or David Copperfield; what I became submerged in was the book itself; in short, not the time of the Turkish occupation or Budapest at the time of the *belle époque*, but the new terrain that was made up of several things: the book itself, the concrete object, the style of the letters, the quality of the paper, the condition of the dust jacket, on it the author's picture (his eyes!), and also, what the book was about, hot, sweating horses, foggy mornings, a bishop's-purple Catholic glint of the eye, Lake Balaton frozen, a London slum, the exotic improbability of an island in the Pacific, and also the situation in which I was reading the book, standing on the bus, lying in bed sick (stewed cherries, chocolate bars!), in the early morning, just after opening my eyes, or just before falling asleep, under my desk during class, mixing the excitement inside me with the excitement outside, Fagin contra Mrs Váradi – but I'm going to stop here, mixing is not the right word, it's misleading, because it's the inside and the outside that stops existing, the game stopped it from existing, whether I was playing soccer or reading, or daydreaming (basically, I was freeing Évi Katona Rácz from various perils, lions, thieves, eighth-graders); these events were not situated in what we call the real world, like an island, easily distinguished from it, outside, inside, no, because they were the real world to me, completely so, without limitation, there being nothing except what is real.

This is why—namely, from simple self-interest—that I took games seriously. I knew perfectly well that a lost game was not the end of the world, but telling ourselves in the middle of a game that once it's over, what happened on the field won't matter any more, we won't care because we must go do our lessons and eat our dinner—I considered this ridiculous, and above all, impossible. The imagination is no laughing matter, I reflected.

It was a bouquet of such reflections that I now handed the two Huszárs, specifically, that when I'm sitting at the base of the brick wall keeping the chestnut up, I am the person who is sitting at the base of the brick wall keeping the chestnut up, that's all!, get it?!, that's all there is to it!, and in comparison to this,



the winnings, the gain, is secondary, inconsequential, a mere afterthought, only the game matters, the game is everything, and outside of this everything, there is nothing.

"Isn't that right?" I said, laughing at them.

Young Huszár said nothing. A painful grimace rippled across his big, round countenance. What I said caused him physical pain. This pain suddenly turned him into a little boy, too. I sprang to my feet. They drew back. The little one began to speak from within that drawing back. No dummy, I knew it all along.

He reasoned that it's right as far as that goes, because, as far as that goes, I'm sitting by the base of the brick wall while he's not sitting by the base of the brick wall, I'm doing keepie-uppies with the chestnut while he's not, and far be it from him to take offence at it, nor is he saying that sitting is preferable to standing, that it'd be better to sit where I'm sitting and to do what I'm doing instead of standing and doing what he's doing, except, and with that except came the crux of the matter, if we call this whole thing a game, then he has no choice but to conclude that... when excited, he spoke in grownup sentences, just like his older brother, that he and I are playing different games, *ergo* the everything is different, too, and outside of this everything there really is nothing, except what falls outside the bounds of my everything and *ergo* does not exist, could easy as pié fall inside the bounds of his everything, something demanding the greatest of attention, and so, to use my own words—up yours, buddy, and I had the distinct impression that I'm stronger than they, that I'm stronger than the both of them, separately or taken together—in short, that this is no laughing matter.

Every time he heard the word game Big Huszár gave a twitch as if he'd been struck. Young Huszár was right, and this confused me; there's no peeping out of everything into nothing. So what's next? The big one had been trying to say something for some time; he gaped, just about launched into it, but checked himself each time, until he spit out what he had to say with the coarse passion of rage, helplessness, and spite.

"You're nothing but a damn *labanc!*"

I knew that this was not true, my family had not been loyalists, because Uncle Pattyi played in the film called *Rákóczi's Lieutenant*, he rode the horse instead of Rákóczi's lieutenant, who was played by Tibor Bitskey, and the stuntman for a freedom-fighter *kuruc* is a *kuruc* himself. Besides, what exactly did he mean by 'you'?

"Your whole family, who else? No use protesting. We learned in school that you oppressed the people. You learned it too!"

"Who oppressed the people?" I yelped, though without full conviction, perhaps because since the subject never came up at home, I couldn't help thinking that maybe we actually did.

"Who...?" Big Huszár didn't know what he was talking about either. "Who? You!"



"Who?! Me?!" No response. At which I lashed out at him. "Or my little sister, the one in nursery school? We oppressed the people? Is that it?"

Again, calm as a grownup, Young Huszár interjected.

"Not your younger brother or anything like that, but your father, and his father, and his father after him!"

"What about you, or your father's father? He could've oppressed them, too!"

They spoke in unison.

"We don't have any."

"That's impossible. Everybody's got to have a family."

"Not us. We got only us and our parents. But they're divorced."

"We got only us, too, me, my brother and sister and my parents, except they're not divorced. Sometimes they fight, though."

All of a sudden, the two Huszárs were so cock-sure of themselves. Could the tables have turned without me noticing?

"That's a lie! You're not just you, you're all of you, you're the whole family, and not just the ones living now, but those dukes and princes, too. The whole lot!" And Big Huszár let out a horse laugh. "That's what I call everything, old buddy!"

"If that's the case, what does that make you?"

"Nothing," said Young Huszár.

"*Kuruc*," said Big Huszár.

"What makes you a *kuruc*?"

"Because we're poor."

"We're poor, too."

At which there was no more to be said on either side, neither theirs nor mine; I retrieved the crushed chestnut from Big Huszár's hand, and sat back down by the base of the brick wall once again. ♣

*Translated by Judith Sollosy*



Ignác Romsics

# Nation and State in Modern Hungarian History

In 1942, when the great Hungarian historian, Gyula Szekfű published a volume of papers and essays, he gave his collection the title *State and Nation: Studies on the Nationalities Question*.<sup>1</sup> His choice of words was both understandable and relevant: if one is to study the relationship between state and nation in Hungarian history, a careful and extensive treatment of the nationalities is certainly necessary. Had nation and state ever coincided—that is to say, had Hungary at any time been inhabited exclusively by Magyars or had, after 1920, all Magyars been united within Hungary—Szekfű would probably have written a book about something more pressing in the midst of the Second World War. And, had the situation changed significantly in this respect since the War, in all probability I would have been requested to talk here today about something quite different.

The relationship between nation, nationality and state has been a focal point of Hungarian history ever since modern nationalism made itself felt for the first time during the 18th century. Some issues, however, can be traced back to the Middle Ages. In discussing his subject, Szekfű decided to go back to the eleventh century and Hungary's first ruler, King Stephen. Indeed, other historians went back even further in time. His contemporary, Tibor Joó, for instance, attempted to find the source of the fundamental features of Hungarian national identity, the Magyar sense of nationhood, in the social structures and world view of the nomadic Magyar tribes in the times before they took possession of the Carpathian Basin.<sup>2</sup> The ahistoric character of these endeavours needs no demonstration in the light of current scholarship. The Hungarian state, of

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course, does have its origins in the realm of Saint Stephen, it could be traced back even further, to the nomadic tribes of the East European steppe, but it must not be forgotten that such states have little to nothing in common with our concept of a constitutional, civic commonwealth. Not even the estates of high medieval and early modern Hungary can be considered direct predecessors of the modern Hungarian state. The founding of the Kingdom of Hungary implied—as the eminent medievalist Pál Engel put it—“a series of painful, but necessary measures which were meant to serve the peace of the realm and to secure the future of Christianity within it.” “First and foremost, three items new to Hungarian society had to be established: a stable system of both feudal estates and rights, and the complex institutions of secular and religious governance.”<sup>3</sup>

One cannot speak of a modern nation, or of modern nationalities before the 19th century, since these terms refer to integrated cultural-political communities. As the term *nobilis Hungarus* could apply to any nobleman, thus covering the whole of the realm's nobility, the simpler term *hungarus* was meant to apply to every person native to Hungary. Feudal law in Hungary, which sharply distinguished between nobles and non-nobles, made no distinction whatsoever between Magyars and non-Magyars. Thus one cannot talk of a nationalities question—with respect to the state—before the 18th century. At most, one can observe a slow progression towards the articulation of a certain common national sentiment. Szekfű was, of course, not ignorant of the differences between a feudal and a modern nation, and he was also aware of the modern character of nationalism. He did distinguish between the nationalities question before and after the 18th century. In one of the essays included in his aforementioned book, he observed that while

it is certainly true that peoples have distinguished themselves based upon their nationalities prior to the French Revolution... the life of nations and peoples was not a self-conscious life... we would be victims of a massive misconception if we were to think that a king, a ruling class meted a decree with obvious national relevance while actually conscious of that relevance, in order to change, to alter some aspect of the structure of the nation or that of the nationalities within the state. ... Kings of old were ignorant of the nationalities question: it was present, but in a way ultraviolet rays or radioactivity are present in our life: these irradiations exist, but we usually do not realize their presence.<sup>4</sup>

The relationship of nation, nationality and state became problematic mainly because of two major factors. One of these was that Hungary's reunification and independence were not achieved after the country, sundered into three in the 16th century, came under one ruler again at the end of the 17th. The territories reclaimed from Ottoman rule did not form part of a sovereign Hungarian state: instead, they ended up as provinces of the Habsburg Empire. What once used to be Hungary was divided into three administrative units from the 18th century to



1848, namely the so-called Kingdom of Hungary, the Transylvanian Principality and the Marches, which remained under military governance. The most heated debates in the country about state and nationhood centred around the relationship between these three provinces and their status *vis-à-vis* the Habsburg Empire. What would be the best national policy—this question underlay most debates—should Hungarian independence, or at least separation, be pursued, should one strive to achieve the reintegration of the country, or would it be better to fight against staunchly conservative historical particularism and provincial separatism, accepting a programme of imperial centralization?

**A** central component of this dilemma that historiography usually addresses is the language question. Latin was used as the official language and was obviously becoming unfit to function as such; consequently there were debates over what language should be chosen to replace it. Neither an integrated cultural community, nor an economy could function without a living language as an effective channel of communication. In the western half of the Empire, German had been accepted as a *lingua franca*, but, in Hungary, the language most widely spoken was Hungarian, by masses of the peasantry as well. Vienna preferred German, ultimately pursuing a kind of Germanization, by Maria Theresa perhaps more tactfully, by her son, Joseph II, more vehemently. "How many great advantages are to be won," his diary says, "through the use of a single language in the whole empire, in intercourse of all kinds, in all professions, tying the parts of the realm closer together, uniting its populace with the bond of brotherly love—this is amply demonstrated by the examples of France, England and Russia, amply enough to convince us or anyone."<sup>5</sup>

Administrative centralization, together with linguistic and cultural homogenization proposed by Vienna, was supported, however, only by a very small minority, recruited typically from the ranks of the bourgeoisie and bureaucrats of the central administration. One of them, the lawyer Samuel Kohlmayer, scion of a German family settled in Pest, expressed the opinion that Hungarian was "only fit for swearing," and were it to become the official language, it would set back cultural development by two centuries. On the other hand, he thought that "German relates more advanced German morals and science."<sup>6</sup> However, the greater part of the Hungarian elite, first and foremost the nobility, did not accept Vienna's proposition. Partly under the influence of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, partly as a counter-reaction to the policies of Joseph II, they opted to modernize and standardize Hungarian. "Never on this globe had a nation acquired wisdom before assimilating the sciences to its language. Every nation became savant in its own language, never in some other's," wrote György Bessenyei as early as 1778, pointing the way for many that were to follow.<sup>7</sup> Language as the focal point of the national question had become an axiom of the new Hungarian nationalism by the beginning of the 19th century.



Latin and German were put on the defensive for the first time in the Education Acts of 1791/92, and the victory of Hungarian became complete with the passing of the Language Bill of 1844. This made Hungarian the language of legislation, administration and the judiciary. Along with this, a struggle unfolded aimed at the unification of Hungarian provinces, and at achieving a higher degree of autonomy within the Empire. This led to the armed conflict between the Imperial Court and the Magyar nation, which erupted at the time of the revolutionary wave which shook Europe in 1848.

The question of nation and state was further complicated by the ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity of the peoples inhabiting the Hungarian Kingdom. Reasonable estimates show that of the 8 million inhabitants of the Hungarian Kingdom, Croatia and Slavonia, as well as the Marches, at the outset of the 19th century, only 42 per cent spoke Hungarian as their mother tongue: 18.5 were Croats or Serbs, 14 were Slovaks, 10 were Romanians, 9 Germans, while Ruthenes accounted for 4 per cent, with Slovenes and others making up the remaining two and a half per cent. In the Transylvanian Principality, with a total population of slightly more than one and a half million, the Magyar population had an even smaller share. They accounted for 36 per cent of the total, while Romanians were in the majority with 53 per cent, and German Saxons 9 per cent. Counting all the provinces of historic Hungary, Magyars made up 39 per cent of the population; even if we disregard Croatia and the Marches, that figure still only rises to 48 per cent.<sup>9</sup>

Travellers and educated men, who made up a minuscule group of perhaps twenty to thirty thousand people, were of course fully aware of the linguistic and ethnic heterogeneity of Hungary. Márton Schwartzner, the first notable Hungarian representative of political arithmetic in Hungary, wrote in one of his books (1798) that *"In keinem Lande der Welt sind vielleicht mehrere Sprachen—und eben deswegen auch so viele Nationen—einheimisch, als in Ungern"*. ("In no other country of the world are so many languages and, therefore, nationalities, at home than there are in Hungary.")<sup>9</sup> One of his disciples, János Csaplovics, held in high esteem by ethnographers, anthropologists and statisticians alike, registered a similar picture two decades later in 1822:

Hungary is a miniature Europe, not only due to its varied landscape and resources, but also by right of its population, as almost all European tribes, languages, confessions, professions, almost all degrees of cultural development, *mores*, morals and customs can be observed here.<sup>10</sup>

The non-Magyar peoples of Hungary followed essentially the same path of nation-building as the Magyars had, albeit with some delay in time. They too looked to reform their languages, founded academies or other such institutions, discovered or, sometimes, invented, their glorious past. The more advanced of these national movements, notably the Croat and the Romanian, articulated political demands as well. Therefore it was foreseeable that the replacement of



Latin and German by Hungarian, let alone the construction of a monolingual society, would stumble upon resistance from the non-Magyar peoples. This realization is not mere retrospective wisdom: several contemporaries recognized the inherent danger. Among them was János Galántai Fejes, a juror of the judicial court of the County of Gömör, and the great political economist, Gergely Berzeviczy. In works published in 1806 and 1807, they both held that a monolingual Hungary was a utopia which could never be realized. The non-Magyar half of Hungary, they argued, will never be convinced to write and speak in Hungarian.<sup>11</sup>

**T**he daring, albeit logical conclusion from this observation would have been the federalization of the Hungarian state. This idea first appeared in Ignác Martinovics's reform plan of 1794, the *Catechism of the Secret Society of Hungarian Reformers*, and in his other writings.

As by the word Hungarian we mean all peoples of varied nationality inhabiting the provinces that are part of Hungary, every nationality must form a separate province, possess a separate political constitution, and ally with each other within the state. Hungary must therefore be changed into a federal republic, in which every nationality lives according to its customs, speaking its own language and freely practicing its religion.

This Hungarian Jacobin envisioned four federated units: Magyarland, Slovakia, a southern Slav Illyria, and Walachia, to be formed out of parts of Transylvania and the Banat. Each federal state would have held the right to choose its official language, only in the federal parliament and in causes afflicting all provinces would the use of Hungarian have been mandatory.<sup>12</sup>

The federalization of Hungary based on ethnicity, however, never gained currency. The vast majority underestimated the significance of linguistic and ethnic differences. It was widely held that, as in France, the epitome of the nation-state, non-Magyars would have to accept, and will in fact accept assimilation, and in a matter of mere decades will become Magyars, not only in their language, but also in their sentiments. This naive optimism was characteristic of Bessenyei, and also of Sámuel Decsy, author of the first coherent and inclusive programme of national renewal. "If we take pleasure in being called Magyars, and enjoy the fruits of Magyar freedom, let us take pleasure in learning the Magyar language, as well." says his 1790 book, *Pannóniai Féniksz avagy hamvából feltámadott Magyar nyelv* (The Pannonian Phoenix or the Hungarian Language Risen from its Ashes). One need but send

Magyar priests to every parish, Magyar schoolmasters to every German, Slovak and Russian school to ... unnoticeably Magyarize all inhabitants of our homeland. ... In a year or two, or at most in three years time every German or Slovak youth can learn perfect Hungarian.



Decsy supposed that even among the Croats, traditionally accustomed to autonomy,

none will be found who would not voluntarily accommodate our glorious language, and refuse to shake hands with us, agreeing to become one not only in sentiment, but also in language.<sup>13</sup>

The next generation, the politicians of the Hungarian Age of Reform, were less optimistic. Some even had a presentiment, that substituting Hungarian for Latin as the official language would present the Hungarian state with the greatest challenge in its modern history. "It is a great misfortune," declared Baron Miklós Wesselényi in the early 1840s, "if several nations live under the same constitution in the same homeland." He thought that accordingly, Saint Stephen and his successors deserved not so much praise as criticism because of their policy of encouraging other peoples to settle in the kingdom. "Before the end of the last century," he wrote in his book *Szózat... (Manifesto...)*, "there is no trace of spreading and entrenching our nationality, although that would have been all too easy." "Hungarian should have become the language of the court, of the judiciary and of legislation" as early as the reign of Matthias and Louis the Great, "rendering it both common, well-liked and necessary," he argued. The Hungarian elite, however, neglected to follow in the footsteps of proto-national West-European absolutisms, and after the 16th century did not possess the power to do so. The possession of power, he argued with great foresight,

can blind one: it seems that power derives from strength and thus cannot be lost. In reality, this often is but a result of history, and can persist for a while even if there is no strength behind it, until the plant, lacking its roots, lies down on the ground as a result of some force or its own dead weight.<sup>14</sup>

In spite of that, Wesselényi, as his friend Count István Széchenyi and most of his contemporaries, thought that the nationalities could be persuaded to assimilate by a programme of liberal reform and the establishment of civil society, or as a minimum, would accept Hungarian as a *lingua franca* in public life. The radical liberal reformer Lajos Kossuth, when warned about the uncertainty of such a prognosis, responded by exclaiming:

Small-hearted lot! You know not the enchantment of liberty, though it is stronger than nationality, confession, blood, kin or friendship, it is a force that unites all in patriotism.<sup>15</sup>

These expressions of opinion confirm that every section of Hungarian political life (with the exception of old-world conservatives protecting Latin) supported Magyarization, with disagreements, at most, over the pace and means of the process. Széchenyi, Wesselényi and Pulszky preferred to think in the longer term, and supported a peaceful assimilation propelled by example, namely social and cultural superiority. They warned that



non-Magyar speakers must not be impeded in using their mother tongue in both private and public spheres, and neither the state nor any individual should compel them to use Hungarian.<sup>16</sup>

The majority, however, did not object to the use of more radical methods.

Few and isolated were the voices that found the courage, as Martinovics had, to face reality. One of these, Ábrahám Szűcs, a poor noble from Pest County, argued in 1843 that Magyarization "will not aid, rather it will harm the Hungarian nation." In multiethnic Hungary, he thought, "constitutional reform can provide the unity needed for prosperity and progress, but not the coercion of language or religion."<sup>17</sup> József Irinyi challenged such opinions: in 1846, in his notes about his travels in Western Europe, he called the "federal system" an idea "harmful, even sinful to our common homeland." "Let us unite our forces," he argued in the name of the majority, "and no one but the Magyars will have a say from the Carpathians to the Adriatic. But if every people is granted self-government, which equals granting weapons, how could we dare to dream about the Magyars living in peace?"<sup>18</sup>

**T**he events after the March revolution of 1848 quickly put an end to the hopes of the Hungarian elite in the Age of Reform. The efforts to establish a Hungarian nation-state provoked not only the resistance of Vienna, but also spurred the non-Magyars of Hungary to articulate their own national goals. Serbian, Romanian and, to some degree Slovak, leaders demanded the federalization of Hungary along linguistic divides. Their initiatives, however, were categorically rejected by the Magyar politicians; this led to widespread guerilla fighting in the South and in Transylvania, and some minor skirmishes in Northern Hungary. Meanwhile, the Croats had designs even more ambitious than territorial and political autonomy. In their national congress of 25 March 1848, they demanded from Magyar leaders everything that the latter had demanded from Vienna: the unification of national territory, a national army, a government responsible to a Croat parliament, a national bank, etc.

In the course of 1848/49, the Hungarian revolutionaries, caught between Viennese imperial ambitions and national separatism, rethought their position on the national and the nationalities questions alike. Parliament, meeting in Debrecen rather than occupied Buda, declared the independence of Hungary and the dethronement of the House of Habsburg on 14 April, 1849. Simultaneously, however, the concept of the Magyar nation-state was revised. This led, by the summer of 1849, to peace negotiations with Serb and Romanian leaders, and Nicolae Bălcescu, representing the Romanians, even signed an agreement with representatives of the Hungarian government on 14 July, 1849. The majority still refused federalism and the granting of territorial autonomy to the nationalities. On 28 July, 1849 the House of Representatives passed a resolution which ensured the free use of any language in religious, municipal and county life, as well as in schools.



Only those with the keenest perception of the situation were willing to go beyond these concessions. Count László Teleki, minister to Paris of the revolutionary government, was one of these few. He wrote on 14 March, 1849 to Kossuth:

Let us show generosity in meting out rights to our nationalities. It is not only Austria that has died, but also Saint Stephen's Hungary. ... *Liberté, égalité, fraternité* do not suffice. Peoples desire to live national lives. We ought to construe a system which makes up for the lack of national unity by harmonizing and acknowledging both individual and national rights.<sup>19</sup>

In practice this would have meant the full autonomy of Croats, Serbs and Romanians who, much in the spirit of Martinovics, would have been linked to the country of Magyars only within the framework of a federation. On the other hand, Slovaks and Germans were to receive a more limited form of territorial autonomy.

The relationship of individual citizen and collective or national rights, and consequently the most desirable inner and outward governance of the new Hungarian commonwealth, was a question which, after the Hungarian defeat in the War of Independence, intrigued exiles as well as those politicians who chose to stay in the country. Of the exiles, it was the designs of the former governor and president Lajos Kossuth that deserve the most attention. His 1851 plan for a constitution, drawn up in exile in Turkey, rested on a decentralized state and the strengthening of democratic local self-governance. This would have permitted, as in the law of 1849, that nationalities use their own languages and nurture their culture in all municipalities and counties where they formed a majority. Pulszky, Szemere, Klapka and especially Teleki, however, entertained more daring and generous ideas, and were prepared to grant territorial and political autonomy to nationalities.

Apart from reforming the structure of the state, Kossuth and his companions sought to give Hungary a fundamentally new diplomatic orientation. They were convinced of the desirability of a confederation between Hungary and its neighbours, especially the Balkan states. In this spirit, Kossuth proposed at the very beginning of their exile, in October 1849, a confederation to be formed by Poland, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia and the Danubian Principalities, calling this union the Alliance of Northeastern Free States. Later, he revised his position, and in his plan for a Danubian Confederation of 1862, he envisioned five member states (Hungary, Transylvania, Romania, Croatia and Serbia) as forming a loose political unit. The common affairs of the confederation were to be handled by a joint parliament and government, assembling every year in a different capital of one of the member states. As the official language of the union, Kossuth proposed neither Hungarian nor German, but French. Kossuth eventually went back on his offer, refusing to accept the separation of Transylvania from Hungary proper, and called the granting of territorial and political autonomies within Hungary the "murdering of the homeland".<sup>20</sup> In spite of this, the ideas



Kossuth developed in exile represent the best example of a certain current in Hungarian political thought. He was the one who produced the most realistic concept of a state based on decentralized and democratic self-government, and this is worth remembering—even if we know that his proposals did not satisfy the nationalities and were at the same time too radical for the greater part of the Hungarian elite, thus rendering them unrealistic.

**O**f the politicians who did not leave Hungary in 1849 or who returned after some years in exile, it was Baron József Eötvös who devoted the greatest effort to overcoming the tension between the unity of the state and its multiethnic character. His views on constitutional rule and the nature of national sentiment did not change considerably over the years; in the two decades following defeat in the War of Independence he did revise, however, his position on how the question should be approached. In his 1850 book, *Die Gleichberechtigung der Nationalitäten in Oesterreich* (The Equality of Rights of the Nationalities in Austria), he accepted the termination of Hungarian autonomy and thought in terms of a centralized empire, with Hungary being one of many crownlands. He did not acknowledge national rights beyond those covered by individual civic rights, consequently he did not propose that provinces take shape with ethnic boundaries. "The nation does not live in its language" he wrote, daringly challenging one axiom of Hungarian and East European nationalism. Language is one element of national identity, but is not equivalent to it, nor is it necessarily the most important component. He went on to argue that wherever civic rights are observed, national equality is automatically realized. As opposed to such an equality of status, recognizing collective national rights based on language would equal granting privileges such as the nobility once enjoyed.<sup>21</sup>

The unfolding crisis of the late 1850s and the ideas of the exiles propelled Eötvös to revise his views several times. In his 1859 book, *Ausztria hatalmának és egységének biztosítékai* (The Guarantees of Austrian Power and Unity), he supported a kind of imperial federalism based on historic entities as opposed to centralization, and after 1861 he was a supporter of the dualist system that finally came into being in 1867. His opinion on national rights changed as well. In his book, *A nemzetiségi kérdés* (The Nationalities Question, 1865), he opposed a potential Hungarian state structure which "would have only recognized historical rights, while not satisfying the demands made by nationalities different in race and language." In the same study he also declared that the nationalities question "can only be solved for good if reasonable demands for political and linguistic rights are observed." Hungary will never become a nation-state, he proposed, as the other nationalities have reached a degree of development where they will never willingly abandon their sense of nationhood and become Magyars. Therefore he emphasized federalism as a means of survival. But he had to realize that since even counties had mixed populations in Hungary, his plan



would not be particularly successful. A redrawing of some county boundaries, he hoped, would yield ethnically more homogenous areas, and he firmly believed that no sane person could oppose such a plan. The fundamentals, he added, have to be equality and democratic self-governance, as Kossuth had envisaged them. He therefore refused to take over the French and Prussian example of centralization, emphasizing that Hungary can never be a centralized state, as "under such an administration even the most moderate demands of the nationalities could not be satisfied".<sup>22</sup> Eötvös, and a few fellow thinkers, such as Baron Zsigmond Kemény or Lajos Mocsáry and the few diehard liberals of the 1860s did not think of Hungary as a nation-state; they viewed Hungary as a neutral institution aimed at balancing and equally promoting the development of all nationalities living inside its borders.

This liberal notion, however, failed to become the basis of a nationality settlement, just as Kossuth's anti-Habsburg and democratic plans remained but dreams. The dominant part of the country's political elite, oblivious of the lesson they should have learned in the War of Independence, held tight to the notion of a nation-state first promulgated in the Age of Reform. This meant that they wished to preserve the Hungarian character of legislation state and county-level administration. Consequently, the Nationalities Law of 1868 contained the stipulation that

In accordance with the basic principles of the Constitution, all citizens of Hungary form one single political nation, the indivisible unitary Hungarian nation, of which every citizen, whatever his ethnic affiliation, is a member with equal rights

and since,

by virtue of the political unity of the nation, the state language of Hungary being Hungarian, and the country's official language being Hungarian, the sole language of debate and administration in the Hungarian Parliament shall continue henceforth to be Hungarian.<sup>23</sup>

This law, of course, was enacted after the Hungarian elite and Vienna agreed on the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, which included the reunification of the parts of historic Hungary as well as delegating the question of the nationalities to the sphere of Hungarian domestic affairs.

One cannot fail to emphasize, however, that the Nationalities Law of 1868 was not only not crudely oppressive in character, but in fact possessed many liberal features. On the municipal level, in administration as in the judiciary, in education and religious life it provided a number of privileges for non-Magyars, the most important of these being the right of using the mother tongue in these spheres. Still, the fiction of the indivisible political nation, which was a modernized version of the old *natio hungarica* and (with the exception of Croats) did not



recognize the nationalities as nations, was unacceptable to ethnically conscious non-Magyars. They, in 1867 and later, hoped to be recognized as co-nationalities and desired the federalization or cantonization of Hungary.

The concept of the nation and state as embodied in the Nationalities Law of 1868 was staunchly defended by subsequent generations, and any notions concerning the federalization of the country were viewed as a political *faux pas*. The cultural tolerance codified in the Act, however, was more and more neglected: instead of support for non-Magyar schools, the government concentrated on expanding Magyar-language education, and realized a programme of Magyarization through them. The series of bills in this direction was spearheaded by Law XVIII of 1879 which made the teaching of Hungarian mandatory, at least as a second language, in non-Magyar schools. The trend reached its apex in the Lex Apponyi of 1907 (XXVII.), which required every non-Magyar elementary school to teach Hungarian so that every fourth-grader spoke and wrote Magyar fluently at the end of the year. The narrowing down of the autonomy of municipalities and the judiciary, the growing influence of central administration, together with the undemocratic character of the electoral system, all had the common feature that they were regarded as serving the cause of Magyarization. "Let us not talk of liberty and equality, it is the rule of the Magyar race that has to be created. The nation-state and national society have to be subservient to this purpose"—Mihály Réz, one of the closest advisors of prime minister István Tisza<sup>24</sup> wrote as the credo of early-20th-century Magyarization policy. Those who carried the generous and tolerant legacy of their great predecessors and the liberal tradition were but rare exceptions. One of these few, Lajos Mocsáry, was called "the white raven" with good reason.

The policy of homogenization, introduced after 1867, managed to produce at least some results. The network of non-Magyar schools was ruptured after 1880, and the share of Magyars—not counting Croatia—rose from 46 to 54 per cent between 1880 and 1910. About 70 per cent of this gain of 1.1 million can be accounted for by assimilation. 90 per cent of these new Magyars, however, were urban Jews, Germans, Slovaks or Croats. Romanians, Serbs and Ruthenes accounted for barely 10 per cent of the assimilants.<sup>25</sup> Still, given another thirty-fourty years, the share of Magyars would have risen further. The dream of 30 million Magyars and an ethnically homogenous Hungary, as held by Jenő Rákosi or Gusztáv Beksics and so many of their contemporaries, must nevertheless be described as utopian.

Besides the resistance of the nationalities, the Magyar assimilationist effort was also constrained somewhat by the irredentist politics of the new Serbian and Romanian states which had consolidated their position by the last decades of the 19th century. Conscious of such support, the leaders of the Hungarian Serbs, Romanians and Slovaks argued openly against the concept of a nationally homogenous Hungary at their joint congress in 1895, declaring that



Hungary cannot have the character of a nation-state, because the character of Hungary as a state is conferred by the totality of the peoples which constitute the state. The nature of the Hungarian state does not authorize a people who do not even form a majority of the inhabitants to claim that it constitutes the state in itself. Only the sum of Hungary's peoples have the right to equate themselves with the state.

In conclusion, these leaders asked for

complete liberty for the non-Magyar peoples of Hungary, in accordance with the linguistic boundaries, by granting autonomous regions, be they counties or municipalities, the right to use their language in public administration and judiciary, ensuring the ethnic character of the given region.<sup>26</sup>

The more radical representatives of the nationalities demanded more than just autonomous regions. They were thinking of the federalization of the Empire and, with it, that of Hungary, much the same way as envisioned by Czech and Croat politicians. The best-known plan was that by Aurel Popovici, a Romanian close to Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Popovici planned to draw up 15 federated units within the Empire, of which he thought two would have been Hungarian in character: a Hungary proper, reminiscent, but somewhat larger than Hungary today, and the smallish Szeklerland.<sup>27</sup>

Shortly before the First World War, the strong man of Hungarian politics, then Prime Minister, István Tisza attempted one last time to find a *modus vivendi* with the nationalities, first and foremost with the Romanians. His efforts, however, produced no results whatsoever. The leaders of Transylvania's Romanians found his offer which included linguistic, administrative concessions as well as a revision of the suffrage and the educational system, far too limited. They held on to their demand for territorial and political autonomy. On the other hand, Hungarian nationalists considered Tisza's action to have been "clandestine high treason."

**T**his antagonism did not recede during the years of the First World War, in fact it deepened as the war dragged on. When in the autumn of 1918, Oszkár Jászi, minister without portfolio in charge of Hungary's nationalities and, like Mocsáry, a true white raven of the era, offered granting an extensive territorial and political autonomy to the leaders of the nationalities, those were already preparing for secession. They were doing so not only with the support and sanction of their conationals in their own nation-states, but also with that of the Great Powers. The dissolution of the Habsburg Empire and historic Hungary was a result of three coinciding factors: the separatism of the nationalities, the irredentist policies of the neighbouring nation-states and the interests of the victorious Great Powers. Had Hungarian politicians been more skilful, minor rectifications could possibly have been obtained as to the terms of the Trianon



Treaty. Any fundamental changes, however, as difficult as it is to acknowledge this, were out of question.

The ruling elite of the inter-war period considered Trianon and the loss of two thirds of the country's territory and one third of the Magyar people a historic calamity and an unprecedented injustice or crime committed against Hungarians. The typical answer of these groups was total rejection. The political platform of integral revision logically followed from this standpoint. If Trianon is totally unacceptable, if it is a crime, historic Hungary must be restored entirely.

This platform was supported by a variety of arguments. Some historians argued the thesis of Hungarian priority in the Carpathian Basin. As János Karácsonyi, a Titular Bishop of the Catholic Church stressed in his essays, Hungarians and only they held full historical rights to the territory of Greater Hungary because, when they captured the Carpathian Basin in the 9th century, the area was basically a no man's land. Historical thinking jumped from this observation to the conclusion that the Hungarian nation held an exclusive right to all territories between the Carpathians and the Adriatic. Count Albert Apponyi, both as leader of the Hungarian peace delegation and as author of the opening essay in the book *Justice for Hungary*, emphasized the cultural superiority and extraordinary political gift of Hungarians, which made them fit to function as a civilizing force in the region, protecting the Christian West at the same time.<sup>28</sup>

A further historic argument was based on the allegedly always tolerant Hungarian nationality policy, beginning with Saint Stephen, the first King of Hungary. This theory, called the "Saint Stephen State Concept", emphasized the peaceful coexistence of the various ethnic groups within Hungary through centuries and projected the reestablishment of this idealized coexistence in the form of a federation in which Hungarians would have enjoyed a status of *primus inter pares*. This solution, the representatives of this interpretation emphasized, was desired not only by the Hungarians but by the former nationality groups as well. Thus, the rebirth of historic Hungary was only a question of time. Among others, Gyula Szekfű popularized this approach, as unhistoric as it is unrealistic. But it should also be noted that the Fascist Arrowcross leader Ferenc Szálasi also subscribed to this theory, showing how popular and widespread it was in Hungarian society and politics.

A fourth characteristic argument stressed the unusual geographical and economic unity of historic Hungary. The unity was characterized as being absolute in Europe and it was claimed that the forced dismemberment of this unity cannot be upheld for a protracted period of time. The reintegration of the detached parts of historic Hungary is an economic necessity without which all the peoples in the region would experience disaster, famine, and a general decline. This view was also accepted and popularized by a number of eminent scholars and politicians, including Count Pál Teleki. "Geography," he emphasized in university lectures in the United States in the early 1920s, "is the most important nation



building factor," and the Paris Peace Conference had been seriously mistaken when, instead of geography and economies, it had based its decisions basically on linguistic differences.<sup>29</sup>

The above approach, it has to be stated, did not remain unchallenged in the political thinking of the inter-war period. Alongside integral revision, there were other visions and plans including the programme of ethnic revision, based on ethnicity and ethnographical characteristics. Viewed from this perspective, the dissolution of the multi-ethnic Hungarian state was not as much a result of an arbitrary Great Power decision, nor of some fatal mistake on the part of the revolutionary governments, but an organic consequence of historical development. As the writer László Németh put it:

The Habsburg Monarchy broke up due to the final consequence of nationalism, the principle of ethnic self-determination. As soon as our nationalities had been attracted by this nineteenth century principle, Hungary had no chance to survive unchanged, tolerance would have caused its break-up just as much as intolerance did.<sup>30</sup>

This ethnic or linguistic approach was characteristic not only of László Németh and many other populist writers, but also of various liberal and democratic forces of the period that formed the leftist opposition to the Horthy regime. In the name of the radical-democrats Rusztem Vámbéry declared in 1928: "We do not aim at anything other than the completion of the country following the ethnographic pattern and the effective protection of the Hungarian minorities". A less radical but still liberal personality, Miksa Fenyő wrote in 1935, "The revision must be more than the reannexation of the ethnically, exclusively or predominantly Hungarian regions along the frontiers."<sup>31</sup>

Some maverick intellectuals, such as the exiled Oszkár Jászi, a radical democrat, or the populist writer and essayist Dezső Szabó went even further. They rejected not only the concept of an integral revision, but the idea of a territorial solution as such. "The question", Oszkár Jászi argued, "is incapable of a territorial solution. The problem is one of racial autonomy in language and culture, and the racial organization of populations within a common territory". As a promising solution he proposed a confederation of the Danubian peoples.<sup>32</sup> Dezső Szabó imagined something even larger: the confederation of all peoples living between the Germans in the West and the Russians in the East. Hungary and its neighbours, he wrote, "have two nightmares: Germany and Russia", and they can only escape from them if they establish the Confederation of East European States.<sup>33</sup> In 1937, the peasant politician Imre Kovács declared, with more determination than was absolutely necessary: "Danubian confederation: there is no other way."<sup>34</sup>

A characteristic product of the rethinking of the Hungarian concept of state and nation was Transylvanianism. The maximalist programme of Transylvanianism did not stop at the demand for an autonomous province: it actually required an independent Transylvania or one that rejoined Hungary. Moderates, however,



who found a voice in the manifesto *Kiáltó Szó* (Speaking Out Loud), from 1921, would have been satisfied with being granted territorial and political, as well as cultural and religious autonomy within Romania. Due to its peculiar character, Transylvanianism had contacts with revisionist ideologies and confederalist, "Danubian" initiatives, as well.<sup>35</sup>

We must not underestimate the influence of Jászi, Szabó and Németh. Younger generations of the inter-war period developed their thinking under this influence. Their own generation, however, could hardly be influenced by such ideas. As for the ruling elite and government circles, they entirely rejected these approaches, and state propaganda was based exclusively on integral revision. A typical example was Lord Rothermere's first proposal of 1927. He had an ethnic readjustment of the frontiers in mind, but his initiative was "corrected" by the writer Ferenc Herczeg, president of the Hungarian Revisionist League by a reminder, that "the so-called Rothermere-line is not a Hungarian proposal ... the Hungarian nation does not surrender its right to territories it held for a thousand years."<sup>36</sup> The same attitude is seen in Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky, a Member of Parliament, as well, who even in 1943 wrote that "Transylvania must be restored as a whole—as an integral unit—to the jurisdiction of the Holy Crown."<sup>37</sup> In the later years of the war, Hungarian government circles sent several similar memoranda to British and American diplomats. Reacting to one such document which proposed a federalized reestablishment of historic Hungary, a Foreign Office official wrote: "If these are the ideas upon the basis of which the Hungarian government hope to enter into discussion with us, they still have a lot to learn".<sup>38</sup>

**S**aint Stephen's realm as a political idea failed not only abroad, but within the country as well. After 1939, when it would have been necessary to put the lessons of history to good use, and reestablish the relationship between Magyars and non-Magyars, no such thing occurred. Prime Minister Pál Teleki gave up his plan of granting autonomy to Subcarpathian Ruthenes after violent protests on several sides. Reflecting on post-1867 and post-1918 national politics, the philosopher Béla Hamvas called the two epochs a kind of "advance payment" which was not invested, but was in fact abused by the ruling elite, the "deprived caste of the nobility", as he called them.<sup>39</sup>

After the Second World War the reinterpretation began of the idea of the Hungarian nation and state after the Trianon boundaries were restored. The new political elite accepted as a starting point the outlook of the pre-war leftist and populist opposition, and attempted to apply their concepts to the current situation.

We cannot surrender our nationality, our liberty, our sovereignty, our character. But we have to accept that we are a small people, ... that can have no more pressing duty today, than drawing the consequences from its successive defeats... We need to take up and profit from the heritage which is still alive in our history, our customs and traditions. But we have to scrutinize this tradition, separate that which is but ornament, fit for museums, and that which can help us construct our lives better,



was the 1946 summary of this programme by Dezső Keresztury, minister of education and religion in the Tildy and Nagy governments in 1946.<sup>40</sup> Imre Kovács, secretary general of the National Peasant Party, echoed the same convictions in reflecting upon the new peace settlement about to be signed:

To demand the thousand year old boundaries is chauvinism. He who does this, is not only a chauvinist, he also acts against the interests of the nation and democracy. He has to be rooted out of politics and society as one roots out pests. But it is not chauvinism to talk about the desire of Magyars to shape their own nation state, and shape it so that it will cover the territories inhabited by ethnic Hungarians.<sup>41</sup>

The break with the idea of Saint Stephen's empire, historical boundaries and the various grand revisionist schemes, as well as the understanding of the consequences of the cultural-linguistic concept of the nation became apparent in István Bibó's post-war essays. These are reflections on the question which are deeply embedded in historical, sociological and political considerations. In his long essay, "*A kelet-európai kisállamok nyomorúsága*" (Distress of East European Small States), he observed that

the stability of international demarcation in this region is to be sought not along historical borders (as in Western Europe) but along linguistic borders. All Western attempts to use historical unity for inculcating unified national consciousness into peoples speaking different languages, such as the primary examples of the Polish, the Hungarian, or the Bohemian experiments, failed irreversibly, and by now their failures are more or less acknowledged. [...] All other purported views—those using arguments of geography, economics, strategy, the rounding off of borders, ease of transportation, and God knows what else—that is fashionable to line up in a crazy haphazard manner when discussing borders are, in fact, completely meaningless. Using them on a large scale can lead to grave problems.<sup>42</sup>

The supporters of the Social Democratic and the Communist Parties rejected the principles of the old Hungarian idea of the state and nation even more categorically. József Révai and Erzsébet Andics, the chief ideologists of the Hungarian Communist party in the post-war years, expounded in a series of papers that the break-up of historic Hungary happened as a consequence of the post-1867 Hungarian treatment of the nationalities, and that in the wake of two world wars (and especially due to Hungarian politics during the second), "even the demand for ethnic boundaries is illusory."<sup>43</sup> "Rationality dictates" wrote Révai "to concentrate all our resources on establishing and strengthening cultural, intellectual and economic links to the Hungarian minorities."<sup>44</sup>

The Peace Treaty of 1947 confirmed the position of the Communist Party. The section of Hungarian society sensitive to the nationalities question realized only at this point that not only integral revision is unimaginable, but even a compromise, revision based on ethnic principles. It was after the signing of this treaty



that Bibó revised his position and emphasized why it is necessary to accept the Trianon boundaries "both physically and mentally." In accordance with this, there is no other course of action for Hungarians, but to avoid "the maelstrom of mutual and immeasurable hate" and set an example of "solidarity and moderation among small nations," while feeling and acknowledging their responsibility for the fate of the Hungarians living abroad.<sup>45</sup> Gyula Szekfű, it will be worth noting, was standing on the same platform by this time.<sup>46</sup>

The ongoing transformation of the Hungarian concept of nation and state in 1946/47 involved first and foremost abandoning all revisionist demands, and coming to terms with having become a small and divided nation. This great intellectual and spiritual reorientation resulted, among other things, in the momentum of the idea of Danubian cooperation. "*Wake up Danubian lands, Old wound, stop aching!*", sang the young students of the People's Colleges in these years. This must be considered a determining feature of Hungarian intellectual life in the postwar years, in spite of the fact that events like the Czechoslovak-Hungarian population exchange and the flow of refugees from Romania and Yugoslavia seemed to suggest that the era of common friendship might not yet have arrived.<sup>47</sup>

The plan of a Danubian confederation, as always in its history, proved to be illusionary after the war. The cooperation of East-Central and South-Eastern European small states was not in the interest of the Soviet Union. The newly socialized economies were operating by the end of the 40's as separate, and to a large degree, autarchic units. As a result of this, the significance of borders not only did not diminish, it actually became heightened. Although Communist ideology always emphasized internationalism in theory, and subservience to Moscow in practice, the dictatorship of Mátyás Rákosi did not try to experiment with obliterating the national past. Rather, it attempted to radically reinterpret it. Contrary to the actual situation of the country, this new historical tradition emphasized the struggle for the freedom and sovereignty of the Hungarian nation. 1867, meaning semi-independence and great power status, was discarded for the likes of Bocskai, Zrínyi, Rákóczi and Kossuth—or the representatives of the programme of a small, but independent Hungary.

The question of Hungarian minorities did not surface in public after 1947. National oppression was interpreted by Marxist theory as a special subcase of the bourgeois system of exploitation, and theoreticians emphasized therefore that "Hungary as well as its neighbours must combat, first and foremost, the reactionaries and chauvinists. After they have been eliminated, the obstacles in the way to an understanding among our peoples will disappear, as well."<sup>48</sup>

Independent rhetoric also characterized the attempt at reforming communism between 1953 and 1956. Imre Nagy's views differed from those of Révai and Andics, at least inasmuch as he attributed real meaning to the concept of independence. "Kossuth had in front of his eyes," he wrote in January 1956, "the independent, sovereign and free existence of Hungarians, ensured not by sec-



onding a Great Power or a Great Power club, but by entering a federation, an alliance of equals with the neighbouring peoples. These are the ideas we need to return to ...".<sup>49</sup> Shortly before the revolution, on 9 September 1956, the Party daily *Szabad Nép*, published a large and critical analysis by Pál Pándi on the fate of Hungarians in Transylvania.<sup>50</sup>

The two weeks of the 1956 Revolution were too short for anything coherent to emerge about the nation or the state. The published programmes of the various political parties and other organizations all demanded the restoration of the country's independence, but none addressed the peculiar, divided character of the nation. There is some sporadic information, however, that this latter question was also on people's minds. On 22 October, 1956, at a meeting of the student parliament of the University of Miskolc, some supposedly chanted "Everything back!" and other irredentist slogans, and on 29 October, 1956, the revolutionary committee of the county of Veszprém demanded that the government devote more attention to the needs of Hungarians living outside Hungary. In the same communiqué there was also word of the necessity of a Danubian confederation. It is known that a lawyer of Transylvanian birth, István Dobai, intended to work out a memorandum for the UN about the reorganization of Transylvania based on federalist principles and its desirable international status.<sup>51</sup>

The Communist leadership after 1956 had to tackle the national and nationalities question in a fundamentally different environment. Nationalism came to be seen as the greatest ideological and political threat, which, as a 1959 party resolution, *On Bourgeois Nationalism and Socialist Patriotism* put it, "was one of the chief weapons of the counterrevolution of 1956." This explains that the emphasis laid on the notion of independence regained, so strong after 1945, receded in the late fifties. The new ideology, argued mainly by Erik Molnár, challenged the progressive character of the national movements, and styled the Habsburgs as the great supporters of modernization. A reevaluation of post-1867 developments followed, with Austro-Hungarian history receiving far more sympathetic treatment than heretofore. This outlook simultaneously challenged the independence-centred Marxist view of the state and the nation as represented by József Révai, Erzsébet Andics or Aladár Mód, but also the actualized historical discourse of the Reform Communists and other 56ers which emphasized the struggle for real independence and the threat of Russian imperialism. "National Communism as popularized by these reformists," the above document goes on, "is a bourgeois ideology, which denounces the universal laws of Marxism-Leninism by appeal to national character and the possibility of a third way. Therefore it threatens the unity of the Communist parties and Socialist countries, and can facilitate the fall of the dictatorship of the proletariat."

The "nationalist counterrevolutionary ideology", this very same resolution states, often focuses on "the question of borders". This attitude, the document



reasons, falsifies the historical and ethnographical facts that have led to the formation of these borders.

Nationalists deceive the public by equating Versailles and Paris, the peace treaties after the two world wars. Trianon was an imperialist peace dictate, which caused strife amongst the Danubian peoples, and it contributed to the consolidation of the interwar fascist regime. The Paris Peace Treaty is a democratic charter aimed at establishing peace in the Danubian basin, promoting the cooperation of its peoples and preventing fascism raising its head once again in the region.

The document is rounded off by a discussion of the conditions of the Hungarian minorities, and concludes by stating that there can be no complaints as far as their fate is concerned.

The seizing of power by the proletariat made it possible to solve the national question in a new way, following the doctrine of internationalism. The nationalities, just as Hungarian minorities in the neighbouring countries, are free of bourgeois or manorial exploitation, as well as of national oppression. After the working classes assume power, national feuds are replaced by the common cause of building Socialism. Mistrust, nourished by centuries of strife, is replaced by trust and the establishing of friendly relationships. The party and the government has these principles in mind, the most basic needs of our people, the building of Socialism and the protection of peace, when it declares that it considers the question of national borders to be settled. In the development of Socialist societies, boundaries lose their significance and function. In the Socialist world order, political boundaries melt away with the triumph of communism.<sup>52</sup>

It is known that Kádár and his fellows—Gyula Kállai and Ferenc Münnich—delivered this message to both the Czechoslovak and Romanian leaders, as well as to representatives of the Hungarian minorities living in both those countries. This, however, proved to be an incentive for these states to continue on the road of national homogenization, which (just like Magyarization before 1918) did not recognize conationality, but considered members of minorities to belong to culturally and linguistically different subgroups of the otherwise unitary nation. The only exception at this time was Yugoslavia, where the federal principle was given some room. It has to be mentioned, however, that for some time after the Second World War, the Hungarian government also continued to boost assimilation within the country.

Proletarian internationalism and its corollary, antinationalism and neglect of the minority question both within and outside Hungary, were finally replaced at the end of the sixties by a new doctrine which acknowledged the nation as an existing cultural and political entity, and in practice promoted the establishment of bonds between Hungarians in the world. In interpreting this transformation, one has to acknowledge once again the pragmatism of the Kádár system, manifested in its economic policies and cultural liberalization.



The new approach is well documented by Party memoranda. The Committee for Culture, a body working with the Central Committee of the Socialist Workers' Party, submitted a paper which can be regarded as the most important. Noteworthy in this study is the implicit distinction between the cultural and the political nation, and its support of pluralistic identities acknowledged as natural. "The nationalities will identify with their leaders and with Socialism all the more, if they feel their culture, their language and educational rights and their right to cooperate with their co-nationals is insured." To promote this, the authors thought it extremely important to provide constitutional guarantees and practical fields of application for the collective rights of the newly recognized nationalities. These guarantees were thought to be the conditions for real cooperation between countries. The study also contained a sentence, probably tacitly meant to inform the neighbouring states about the discrepancy in scale, according to which "the nationalities question has different significance in different countries, depending on the numbers of a minority, and their concentration".<sup>53</sup>

After this expert opinion, a series of newspaper articles and government decrees demonstrated that Hungary had really broken with the ideology of "automatism." It soon became obvious that the new Hungarian policy was to centre on the refusal to endorse assimilation and in the support for the Hungarian minorities in the struggle to preserve their identity. Kádár's circle experimented with what Bibó and Szekfű had essentially been promoting in 1947, and what reappeared through a mini-renaissance of the national idea under the influence of writers like Gyula Illyés, Zádor Tordai, Sándor Csoóri and some others at the end of the sixties. The Mother-Tongue Movement (*Anyanyelvi mozgalom*), launched in 1970, was just one visible sign. At its triannual meetings only Hungarians living in the country or in the West were permitted to participate at first, but by 1977 Czechoslovak, Yugoslav and Soviet Hungarians also appeared, with only delegates from Romania being conspicuously absent.

Hungarian domestic policy was modified as the Hungarian minorities came to be viewed in an entirely new way. The aforementioned doctrine of automatism was replaced by positive discrimination for minority cultures around 1970. In 1972, the constitution was revised so as to permit acknowledging minorities as collective bodies. This radical reform was in all likelihood propelled by the hope for mutual minority policies on the part of neighbouring countries. At the 20th Congress of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party in 1980, Kádár expressed his views on the matter with unusual frankness: "Here with us, in Hungary, people of different ethnicity, in accordance with Lenin's programme of minority protection live with us as all other citizens do, work with us, and progress in their lives under the protection of our laws and constitution. We wish the same for Hungarians outside of our borders."<sup>54</sup>

The Hungarian example was only reciprocated by the Yugoslavs. The situation turned extremely problematic in Romania, where Hungarians suffered in-



creasingly serious discrimination after Ceausescu's rise to power in 1965. The Hungarian government attempted to intervene in the treatment of this minority on several occasions. Kádár met Ceausescu twice in 1977, in Debrecen and in Oradea, while in 1982 György Aczél, the chief ideologist, visited Bucharest for the same purpose. Meanwhile, at the follow-up meetings of the Helsinki Conference, the Hungarian delegates usually pursued a vigorous human rights and minority protection policy, thus in Belgrade in 1977, in Madrid in 1980 and in Ottawa in 1983.

Hungarian government intervention, however, did not meet with success. This failure explains in part why in the years before, during and after the collapse of Communism and the triumph of democracy, one of the most heatedly debated issues still remained the fate of the Hungarian minorities. The first coherent programme of these years appeared in 1982, and was authored by the editors of *Ellenpontok* (Counterpoints), a samizdat Transylvanian publication. The memorandum stated that "two ethnic groups can coexist only if they regard each other as equal partners." Taking this as an axiom, Géza Szócs and his fellow dissidents claimed autonomy for predominantly Hungarian territories and a "due share" in government. They went on to plead for Hungarian being recognized as an official language, equal to Romanian, in all areas of Transylvania where a Hungarian populace still lived.<sup>55</sup>

The late eighties and early nineties saw the appearance of a host of similar programmes. Their most important shared feature lay in the fact that these did not raise the possibility of a rectification of frontiers, but concentrated on achieving the status of conationality and all the territorial and political rights such a status entails. To the best of my knowledge, there has been but one significant voice in Hungary proposing something different: that of István Csurka, and his political party MIÉP (Hungarian Justice and Life Party). On the occasion of the eightieth anniversary of the Trianon Treaty, Csurka talked about "Árpád conquering the land, Saint Stephen founding the country that is our homeland" and the resulting "right" and "duty" of present-day Hungarians to hold on to that heritage, including all the foreign nationals who have settled in historic Hungary over the centuries. This speech signalled the resurrection of the idea of the realm of Saint Stephen and the doctrine of irredentism put to rest in 1947.<sup>56</sup> Certain sociological data also suggest that a segment of the population still has not managed to accept the break up of the country and the loss of national unity after the First World War.<sup>57</sup> Although the process of European integration has opened up promising perspectives in this respect, there is still no real hope for a mutually acceptable and lasting solution in the near future. What can be hoped for is effective problem management, the sensible handling of conflicts, minimizing the chances for an ethnic explosion in the region.

The lack of political unity of the Magyar ethno-cultural community, however, has to be regarded as being merely one of the problematic features of the



Hungarian identity and state responsibility. An equally important question today is the position of the Roma minority in Hungary, who make up more than five per cent of the country's population, if one uses the lowest figures. As the birth-rate of the Roma is significantly higher than that of non-Roma, their relative share in the population is likely to grow. In a few years time, there will be districts and areas where the Roma account for an absolute majority. Even though over 80 per cent of Hungarian Roma call Hungarian their native language, there is no guarantee that this is going to remain this way. And even if the situation does not change in this respect, this does not equal an increase or even stagnation in their willingness to integrate into the mainstream of society. According to 1993 data, 84 per cent of married Roma chose a Roma as their spouse.

In the past ten years we have witnessed several attempts aimed at the cultural reintegration of the Hungarian nation. Precious little has been done, however, to promote coexistence with the Roma, even though it cannot be excluded that in a few decades the Hungarian state will once again face a minority question as complex and serious as in the nineteenth century. This and some other challenges of the 21st century, including globalization and integration into Euro-Atlantic organizations, should prompt us to rethink our old concept of the Hungarian nation and the Hungarian state. ■

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- 51 ■ Ádám Szesztay: *Magyarország és a szomszéd országok nemzetiségpolitikája 1956–1962* (The Policy of Hungary and its Neighboring States Concerning the Nationalities 1956–1962). Budapest, Manuscript, 2000, pp. 10–15.
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- 54 ■ *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt XX. kongresszusának jegyzőkönyve* (Minutes of the 20th Congress of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party). Budapest, Kossuth, 1980, pp. 450–451.
- 55 ■ "Az Ellenpontok memoranduma és programjavaslata" (Memorandum and Proposal of "Ellenpontok") in *Beszélő Összkiadás*, vol. I. (1981–1984) pp. 255–259.
- 56 ■ <http://www.miep.hu/forum/h2000/jun/trianon/htm>
- 57 ■ See György Csepeli: *National Identity in Contemporary Hungary*, Boulder, Co. ARP, 1997, pp. 194–195.



George Gömöri

# Czeslaw Milosz's "Antigone" and the 1956 Revolution

**T**he Polish Nobel-laureate Czeslaw Milosz's entire poetry is based on dichotomies. He is torn between the truth of "classicism" and that of "realism"—at least this is my reading of what he said in one of his Harvard lectures. According to him, in the moment of creation every poet has to make a choice between the contradictory commands of poetic language and the demands of reality. Moreover, in the collection *Poznawanie Miłosza* (Getting to Know Milosz, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Cracow-Wrocław, 1985) the critic Tomasz Burek defines Milosz's fundamental dilemma as "the impossibility of settling... either on the 'historical' or the 'eternal'." Add to this the Manichean tendencies discovered by more than one critic in Milosz's philosophy and you have not one, but a whole list of dichotomies.

This constant but fruitful struggle can be followed throughout Czeslaw Milosz's creative career. Generally speaking Milosz tries to avoid the stance of a *Zeitdichter*, a poet who follows the fashion of the day or fulfils the expectations of society; he prefers to tackle eternal subjects. All the same, he is repeatedly forced to react to the twists and turns of history which plunged his homeland into crisis: first the German occupation from 1939 to 1945 and then the Soviet liberation which soon led to one-party dictatorship and the complete subjugation of Poland to Soviet interests. Milosz, who witnessed the Warsaw uprising, found himself in a difficult situation after the Second World War. He could become a valued "fellow-traveller" of a new regime which lacked social consensus, and was desperately seeking for intellectuals of a pre-war reputation who would give it support. Like a number of other writers, Milosz was offered a diplomatic

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post in 1947—first in Washington and then in Paris—but as time passed and the Communists eliminated the Polish Peasant Party and with it the last vestiges of formal democracy, his unease also grew. The last straw was the introduction of Socialist Realism in Poland at the Szczecin Congress of Writers in December 1949. A few months later Milosz decided to cut his ties with the Communist regime, and from 1951 he began to publish in the emigré journal *Kultura*. *The Captive Mind*, in which he explained the self-hoodwinking mechanism of Polish intellectuals supporting the Communists, was published in 1953, but his previous collaboration with the Soviet puppet regime in Poland was not forgotten by most right-wing emigrés, who would have no truck with Czeslaw Milosz.

*Antigone* was apparently written in 1949 but without the hope of publication. In the earlier collection *Ocalenie* (Rescue, 1945), the censor had not crossed out the following lines from the poem 'In Warsaw': "You swore never to touch / The deep wounds of your nation / So you would not make them holy... But the lament of Antigone / Searching for her brother / Is indeed beyond the power / Of endurance" (*The Collected Poems*, Penguin Books, 1988, p. 76). In the fragment which he wrote four years later, Milosz goes further: while avoiding taking any side as to who should rule Poland, the poet makes it clear that he supports Antigone's moral integrity against Ismene's acceptance of compromise and silent submission. Not paying respect to the fallen is Creon's mistake—it is a mistake which one day will undermine his throne. In Sophocles, Antigone's brother is one of those who attack Thebes; in Milosz's poem the unburied fallen happen to be defenders of the city, they are heroes of the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. The "falsification of history", mentioned in Antigone's last but one speech, was taking place before Milosz's eyes: the young men who, as members of the Home Army, fought the Germans, were now vilified as anti-Soviet "agents of the London government in exile" and in most cases were imprisoned by the Communist authorities. Milosz's protest therefore is specifically aimed against the "new Creons" who think they are strong because they have power, but in fact they are weak, for the spirits of the dead are against them. Moral protest is here turned into political prophecy, foreseeing the victory of the disrespected and unrepresented dead at some undefined time in the future.

Milosz locked his poem in the drawer in 1949, but after his defection to the West he could not have it published—he might have been accused of antedating the poem in order to curry favour with the nationalist exiles. The first (and perhaps the only) propitious time to publish *Antigone* arrived in 1956, when the Hungarian revolution once again made half-forgotten grievances and protests topical. As Milosz always fought Polish nationalism and the tendency to blame foreign powers for all of Poland's troubles, this was a moment when he could show sympathy with the traditional rhetoric of 19th century Polish Romanticism.

Although the poem uses a classical topos and to some extent a classical diction, it is the protagonists' passion that makes it truly Romantic. And as this



poem was not "mainstream" Milosz, he probably felt uneasy soon after its publication. Did he commit the sin of compromising his artistic autonomy by fitting in for a moment with the tradition of the great Polish Romantics? I don't think he did; but he never included this poem in any of his later (English or Polish) selections. I reprinted the original twice in my anthology *Polscy poeci o węgierskim październiku* (Polish Poets on the Hungarian October) in 1986 and 1996. Milosz must have been happy to liberate his poem from the drawer with a dedication to the Hungarians; later he showed considerable interest in matters Hungarian. In 1960 *Węgry* (Hungary) was published by the Instytut Literacki in Paris—this was a small anthology, comprising two political essays, one by the Hungarian exile Péter Kende and another one written under the pseudonym "Hungaricus" (Sándor Fekete), as well as eight poems by young Hungarian poets. Milosz translated the essays from the French, and as he knew no Hungarian, asked the Hungarian exile Éva Faragó to help translate the poems into French. These poetic translations of Czesław Miłosz are, unfortunately double paraphrases; still, the fact that a well-established Polish poet, such as himself, would translate young Hungarians, none of whom had ever published a single book of poetry, is remarkable in itself. In his introductory notes to the book Milosz shows the source of his sympathy: "The Hungarian tragedy [i.e. the suppression of the revolution] created shock in Poland and it was felt as the Poles' own tragedy... There is hardly any Polish poet who would not have devoted at least one poem to the revolution, using more or less transparent allusions." *Antigone* makes clear allusions to the abuse of power for which the Creons of the twentieth century were ultimately punished just as the Creons of antiquity had been. I, for one, would not hesitate to place it amongst Milosz's most impressive poems. ❁



Czeslaw Milosz

# Antigone

*A fragment, written in 1949, which  
I dedicate to the memory of the workers,  
students and soldiers of Hungary.*

ANTIGONE:

*To accept what happens just as one accepts  
Seasons piling pell-mell on one another,  
And on our human world to cast the same  
Indifference as on mute Nature's transformations?  
So long as I shall breathe I shall say—No.  
Do you hear me, Ismene? I shall say—No.  
Nor have I any need of consolation—  
Your night-time flowers in springtime, nightingales,  
Sunshine or passing clouds, familiar streams,  
No, none of these. Let whatever is left  
Be left to ripen, unquelled, uncontrolled.  
All that is worth remembering is our pain.  
See these rust-covered ruins, my Ismene?  
They know it all. Death with its crow-black wings  
Has masked or muffled all those years behind us  
When we might have believed this land of ours  
To be like any other, and our people just  
Like those who live in any other land.  
The curse of fate must lead to sacrifice  
And sacrifice, in turn, to fate's next curse,  
And when this fate fulfils itself, the time  
To protect our petty lives is over.  
This is no time to shed tears on ourselves.  
There is no time. Let an immense catastrophe  
Sweep across this entire pitiless Earth.  
As for those laughing now at our despair,  
Let them witness their own towns razed to dust.  
Creon's law! Creon's rule! Who in the world  
Is Creon when our world itself is crumbling?*



ISMENE:

*Indeed. But Mother and Father both lie dead  
As do our brothers, and no revolt of yours  
Will bring them back. So why keep looking back?  
An old man with a stick in a silent city  
Goes rummaging in vain for fallen sons.  
Old women quietly mourn amidst the dust  
Then pass on by, their wizened heads bowed down.  
Yet even in bleak neighbourhoods, life greens again.  
Nettle and wormwood creep across the rubble.  
Like a slip of paper in a fire, a butterfly  
Goes fluttering at the rock edge of a precipice.  
Children in ragged clothes return to school,  
Lovers' hands clasp each other's. In all this,  
Believe me, powerful rhythms reassert themselves.  
Sobs commingle again with celebration—  
Persephone returns again to earth.*

ANTIGONE:

*Fools alone believe they can live easy  
By relegating Memory to the past.  
Fools alone believe one city falling  
Will bring no judgement down on other cities.*

ISMENE:

*Do not belittle how hard it is, Antigone,  
To go on suffering, forcing lips and hearts  
To silence. For each of these small victories  
Is victory too. This struggle gives us hope.*

ANTIGONE:

*Sister, I need no hope of yours. Remember,  
I have seen the remains of Polynices  
Beneath the steps of a destroyed Cathedral,  
With tufts of light hair wafting from his skull  
Like any little boy's. A crumpled handful  
Of bones wrapped in a dark and rotting cloth.  
The stench of a corpse. That was our own brother.  
There was a time his heart beat just as strong  
As yours and mine do. He knew joy, sang carefree*



Songs—and knew the fear of death, since the same  
Voices which call us now, called out in him  
Towards bright vistas of a future life.  
Yet, faithful to his word and pledge, he willingly  
Made his choice to relinquish them, and die.  
Twenty years old, a boy, handsome and gentle,  
He had to quell whatever plans he'd nourished,  
Works hardly started, reticent, shy thoughts,  
And alone, force his will to face destruction.  
And this is he who now, by Creon's command,  
Is branded traitor, and his place some dark  
Sand-blown corner out on the city's edge  
Where wind goes whistling through his empty helmet.  
Yet for the others, glory-peddlers, filchers,  
Statues will be erected and young girls  
Will lay out wreaths in all the broadest squares  
And lights twinkle from torches on their names.  
Here, though, nothing, but dark. The trembling hands  
Of writers, impelled by debasing fear,  
Will not stint in their praise for thieves of glory.  
And so, those stripped of legend will pass down  
Into the centuries' amnesia. Traitors? Heroes?

ISMENE:

By means of words, pain kindles into flame.  
Who maintains silence, perhaps suffers more.

ANTIGONE:

These are not merely words, Ismene—not just words.  
Creon shall never have the strength to build  
His state upon our graves. Nor shall he found  
Government upon sheer power of the sword.  
The dead wield greater power—so great, no man  
Can hide from it. Although on every side  
He fences himself with countless guards and spies  
Still they will find him out. The hours themselves  
Await the ironic laughing dead to trample  
Upon the madman who still disbelieves them.  
Then, when he's called to settle his account,  
An error, small at first, will trickle through  
His calculations, tiny, as if from nowhere,



*Then multiply and magnify a thousandfold,  
And then, while treason torches towns and villages—  
Enough—the flaw will ripen, swell to madness,  
Crying, Blood! Blood! Too late by then for any  
Red ink flowing from his hand to blot  
That single error. It will be his end.  
Does this wretched Creon think he'll govern us  
As if ours were some land of brute barbarians,  
As if each stone were not engrained with memories  
Of its own tears of despair, tears of hope?*

*Translated by Richard Burns and George Gömöri*



György Szűcs

# The Hungarian Barbizon

István Réti and the Nagybánya Painters

I am not in the position to judge the role and place of the Nagybánya Artists Colony in the history of Hungarian painting, in view of the fact that I regard myself more or less a member of that colony. [...] It is true that by the Summer of 1914, the time that I first went there, the artists colony had already passed its zenith, and when I left it, Nagybánya (Baia Mare) was about to be annexed to Romania. Nevertheless, at that time Károly Ferenczy was still there, and I could feel the colony's and the countryside's formative influence on my artistic attitude. [...]

Thus spoke the painter István Szónyi in 1953, looking back on his early years at Nagybánya (Baia Mare), going on to emphasize

In my view, the most important thing about Nagybánya is that it started a movement, which is essentially still alive, and one can add something to it, one can continue it, and if necessary, one can reach back to it.

If said in a ideologically neutral cultural milieu, these words, valuable source material as they make, would do no more than add local colour to an era in Hungarian history: fragments of information about the early days of a painter who has already reached the zenith of his career. We must not forget, however, that we are in the 1950s, when socialist realism on the Soviet model reigned supreme, with important and influential movements being written off as "hostile", and left-wing aspects of complex oeuvres being hailed as "progressive traditions", whatever that meant, earning the artist in question some patronizing pats on the back by his politically committed but artistically negligible contemporaries.

The Nagybánya Artists Colony, which had been established in 1896, was no exception in attracting the marked attention of the Party's official art critics. All the more so, since in the framework of arguments and counter-arguments it was rela-

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tively easy to present oeuvres in such a way that Nagybánya could be used against Nagybánya, so to speak. To complicate matters further, the peace treaty after the First World War transferred the town of Nagybánya to Romania, and although the colony managed to preserve its autonomy for a long time to come, right until the second half of the 1930s, it gradually came to form part of the Romanian political and cultural milieu. A large Nagybánya exhibition scheduled to take place in Budapest in 1953 fell through, because "the preparations were ideologically incorrect", to use a contemporary turn of phrase by an art historian. At the same time, despite all the slogans about proletarian internationalism, Romania looked askew at research that revealed and confirmed the presence of Hungarian traditions.

What could the "ideologically correct" approach have meant in connection with Nagybánya? On the one hand, it strengthened the line of demarcation that the founders' generation—István Réti, Károly Ferenczy, János Thorma—had themselves drawn between their plein-air naturalism and impressionism and the second generation's modernist tendencies based directly on French Fauvism, effectively jettisoning from the Nagybánya movement the artists associated with the latter group, such as Béla Czóbel, Vilmos Perlrrott-Csaba, Sándor Ziffer and Tibor Boromisza, who were disparagingly called the "neos". Originally they were accused of turning away from nature, of extreme rationalism and of the whimsical use of compositional elements; now the charge against them was allying themselves with "a formalist programme established outside Hungary". On the other hand, establishment art critics raked through the oeuvres of the Nagybánya painters, who had mostly painted landscapes, portraits and still-lives, that is to say ideologically neutral genres, for elements that could somehow be used to lend a revolutionary aura to their art. This was how János Thorma's monumental painting *Rise Hungarians!* came to receive especial attention. Depicting the outbreak of the 1848 Revolution, with the martyr poet Sándor Petőfi standing at the centre, the painting's message was nicely in tune with the 1950s' popular slogan "Our banner, Petőfi", and its narrative also met the crucial requirement of socialist realism: ease of comprehension. Another artist to receive deferential treatment was István Réti, an accomplished artist of sober bourgeois outlook whose compositions *Burial of a Home Guard* (1899) and *Kossuth's Portrait* (1931) were embraced as proofs for the status of a revolutionary democrat. Therefore, if only at the price of some compromises, Nagybánya made it to the exclusive club of "progressive traditions" and, as a result of ongoing art historical research, Lajos Németh's book on Simon Hollósy could be published in 1956, followed by Nóra Aradi's monograph on István Réti in 1960.

The shifts in cultural policy favoured, or at least did not stop, the publication of István Réti's posthumous work, *A nagybányai művésztelep* (The Nagybánya Artists Colony, 1954), admittedly only after the editor's omissions of certain parts that either commented on the events of recent history in an "incorrect manner" or discussed the purpose of art from an "outdated" aesthetic viewpoint.



This bulky tome appeared to continue and complement Károly Lyka's books, *Magyar Művészet Münchenben* (Hungarian Art and Artists in Munich, 1951) and *Festészeti életünk a millenniumtól az első világháborúig* (Hungarian Painting from the Millennium to the First World War, 1953). The connection is not coincidental, since Lyka, who started out as a painter studying under Simon Hollósy, was one of the best-qualified art historians writing on 20th-century Hungarian art, and the best interpreter and advocate of the Nagybánya movement in particular, who launched the educational reforms of the 1920s at the Budapest Academy of Fine Arts jointly with István Réti. The latter even acknowledged Károly Lyka's indirect contribution to the book in connection with one of the theoretical chapters, which discussed the aesthetic background of Nagybánya painting:

In the meantime Spring and Summer came, and we roamed the open country together, but our favourite lair remained the Luitpold Café. He looked through the numerous foreign papers and picture magazines. Sometimes we engaged in heated debates, and I greatly benefited from this exchange of ideas. Having a quick-witted, acerbic and sarcastic spirit, he often cornered me. I learned a great deal from him in literary, art theoretical and other matters. Spencer and Taine were our main philosophical beacons just then

Réti recalled the atmosphere of their Munich stay in the 1890s in the book *Emlékkönyv* (Festschrift) published in 1944 on the occasion of Károly Lyka's 75th birthday. Therefore, it was hardly a coincidence that ten years later, when Réti's book needed a foreword, the editor's choice fell on Lyka to write it. It appears that the bohemian lifestyles of Simon Hollósy and his company and the significance of Nagybánya's foundation alike tickled the fancy of many writers. According to the evidence of one of Lyka's early letters from 1893, he entertained plans to write a novel about the Munich circle of Hungarian artists; later an American publisher approached the Boston painter Edward Johnson to write a book about the latter's visit to Nagybánya—we can read about this incident in the 1896 July issue of the magazine *Új Idők*. Finally, the task fell on István Réti to write a book on how the Nagybánya artists colony came about, to analyse the art of its successive generations, and to define Nagybánya's place in Hungarian art history. From the viewpoint of genre, the book is somewhat hard to classify, since its polished literary style allows readers to enjoy it as a memoir, while the accuracy of information and the thorough familiarity with contemporary documents (the latter considerably strengthened after the author's consultations with the period's eminent art historians, including Elek Petrovics, Ferenczy's monographer) render it a work of key importance. It is only natural that the author, in spite of his efforts to remain objective, shows certain partiality towards the founders' generation, weighing the relative importance of the Nagybánya artists with hindsight, taking into consideration the subsequent development of Hungarian art up to the 1940s, whereas in discussing the colony's significance, he uses it both as a weapon of "spiritual defence" against the comeback of



conservatism in the service of politics and representation and as a belated justification against modernist tendencies.

We know that Réti signed a contract with the publishers Atheneum in the Spring of 1940 to write a book of about 130,000 words, but perhaps we are not very far off the mark in suggesting that he had already started work on his *magnum opus* as far back as 1909. That was the year when the ambitious mayor of Kecskemét proposed to set up an artists colony in the town in the heart of the Great Plain, and by offering better working conditions he managed to lure away from Nagybánya some of the painters led by Béla Iványi Grünwald. That was when Réti published his first, comprehensive essay, *Tizenegy esztendő a nagybányai festőkolónia életéből* (Eleven Years in the Life of the Nagybánya Artists Colony), in the local paper *Nagybánya*. In connection with this, Lyka says: "He wrote the story of the Nagybánya painters very nicely and accurately, and this brief work can lay claim to being treated as a source publication." Although these words could be read as guidance, Réti, unlike his friend Károly Lyka, never laid down his brush for good, but since he was inclined to contemplation and soul-searching, he often turned to writing to get him over his creative crises.

If we arranged in sequence Réti's writings published in his own lifetime, we would essentially get the book's structure and content. In fact, Réti himself chose this patchwork method. But the seams are apparent only to scholarly analysis, because the book, rather than being a series of mechanically strung essays, is the rewritten, re-thought and homogenized fair copy of the original studies. The introductory study of the Nagybánya jubilee exhibition of 1912, the series sketching out the portraits of the co-founders of the colony, Hollósy, Ferenczy, Thorma and Iványi Grünwald, which was published in 1924 in the journal *Nyugat*, or his study *A művészet és természet* (Art and Nature) which appeared in the Annals of the Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest, provided the material for Réti's book, who retired after 1939, and tried to shut himself off from the world as much as possible.

I shall suspend my correspondence and inquiries for some time to come. The reason for this is that I have buried myself in Hollósy,

he wrote in 1941 to a former student of his, András Mikola, at Nagybánya. Then he also touched on his working method:

I have re-written my old piece, and expanded it. A large number of previously unknown paintings and writings by Simon Hollósy have emerged since then, and I have to incorporate these into my old essay, and in general much of it has to be revised and put in a new light.

The completion of further drafts and the revision of the data were made easier after August 1940, when under the second Vienna Award Nagybánya was ceded back to Hungary (remaining in Hungarian possession until 1944). András Mikola and János Krizsán, the leaders of the artists colony, continuously sent



documents to Réti, mostly lists of students and photographs suitable for publication, "to lay a broader and deeper foundation for the book", in Réti's words. The opening lines of a letter written by Mikola in October 1940 are of interest: "I guess your work is almost finished by now...;" even so, outside the circle of his closest friends no one could read the freshly typed chapters for years to come. He must have, indeed, completed one version of the manuscript, since in early 1941 it received the highest literary prize, one that had been founded by Ferenc Baumgarten, the aesthete and art critic who had died in Germany in 1927.

Nagybánya once again came to the forefront of interest. Elderly painters revisited the scene of their former glory, and members of the younger generation flocked to the town on a special grant known as a Transylvania Scholarship. The expression "Hungarian Barbizon", which had been coined fifty years earlier with the intention to help the public in placing the artists colony, re-appeared in the title of several newspaper articles in the 1940s. The public could also read about the lighter moments in the colony's life after January 1942, when Józsi Jenő Tersánszky, a writer born in Nagybánya, published his serialized novel *A Félbolond* (The Half-Witted), a charming insider's account of the bohemians, in a Budapest literary magazine.

Although the style of the finished text suggests permanence, there are places in the book where we can sense the passage of time, in connection with occasions when Réti learns about the death of some of his colleagues. This was so in Béla Iványi Grünwald's case, who died in September 1940 amidst constant worries for the life of his wife and historian son, both of whom had remained in London throughout the Blitz. Luckily, the book, regardless of the hap-hazard conditions surrounding its birth, escaped the fate that books here in Central Eastern Europe so often have: that of being left in torso. "Today I have finished the main body of my book: it has now been all typed up. I have the complete list of names up until 1935, also typed up. The same applies to the list of illustrations," Réti informed Elek Petrovics, who in 1943 helped him in collecting the illustrations. Although book publication was not suspended even for the last years of the war (a booklet entitled *Képalkotó művészet* (Visual Art) containing Réti's two smaller theoretical pieces appeared as late as 1944), sadly he did not live to see the publication of *A nagybányai művésztelep*, his literary enterprise that in posterity's view has even overshadowed his accomplishments as a painter. He died during the siege of Budapest in the middle of January 1945.

The artist's widow faithfully preserved the manuscript that had somehow survived the destruction of the studio. It was eventually published with the help of the aging friend, Károly Lyka, in 1954. Until 1992, when the complete text was published, it continued to function as a basic handbook for those who cared to learn about the Nagybánya artists colony. We can wholeheartedly share in the enthusiastic reaction András Mikola sent to Réti's widow:

I fell on the book with a vengeance and was unable to put it down until I had read the last word. It was quite understandable, considering that the material mattered to me a



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## Nagybánya Exhibitions

The approaching centenary of the Nagybánya artists colony's foundation (1896) gave a new impetus to research into art history. In the early 1990s MissionArt Gallery launched the publication of a series of monographs and source publications. Simultaneously, preparations for the 1996 exhibition "The Art of Nagybánya" and the accompanying catalogue were being made. Recently, the works of Nagybánya artists have featured in several exhibitions both in Hungary and abroad. One such exhibition, entitled *Le fauvisme ou "l'épreuve du feu"*, was held in 1999 in the Musée National d'Art Moderne of Paris, where compositions by Béla Czóbel, Sándor Ziffer, and Vilmos Perlrótt-Csaba were shown. The exhibition *Künstlerkolonien in Europa* arranged by the Germanisches Nationalmuseum of Nuremberg, will continue into the year 2002, with works by Károly Ferenczy, Béla Iványi Grünwald, István Réti, and Sándor Ziffer. Visitors to *Lumières magyares*, an exhibition presenting the colourist trends of Hungarian painting between 1870 and 1914, held in the Hôtel de Ville of Paris, will also have a chance to see a large number of works by Nagybánya painters. All these together, in conjunction with the essays published in the catalogues of the separate Nagybánya exhibitions (*Seele und Farbe*, Collegium Hungaricum, Vienna, 1999; *Lights and Colours*, Muzeul Național de Artă, Bucharest, 1999) will contribute to a more complex picture of Hungarian art in the first half of the 20th century. ■

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great deal, and in some cases I felt that it unlocked from my mind memories of my youth, describing our struggle and our aims in life in such a splendid style that it makes the book a pearl of not only our writing on art but also of our literature in general. The characterization of the artists, the insightful analysis of the works, and the eloquence of the language are unequalled, engaging the interest not only of painters and art historians but of everyone who understands and appreciates literature.

As we have seen, the book on the Nagybánya painters took a long time to be written and published, for historical, political and personal reasons. The situation is not much simpler today, when the essence of the artists colony and the free school, their influence, and position within Hungarian art, have to be grasped and the findings have to be published. It must be stressed that questions on a possible common style or links to European art can be best answered with relation to individual oeuvres. In 1885, when Simon Hollósy created the first work to achieve real success, *Tengerihántás* (Corn Huskers), he could not suspect that he and the students of his free school, to be opened the following year in Munich on the encouragement of his friends, would become the vanguard of an artistic movement which prepared for the 20th century. The Munich Hollósy circle soon became famous, attracting students not only thanks to Hollósy's prophetic dedication and the romantic glow of his intellect, but with a new



teaching method, which set aside plaster of Paris models, and used *plein-air* exercises instead, with a result of such high-quality skills and knowledge that even "opposing" German professors welcomed his students at their academy courses.

At this time novel thought was represented by the art of a painter who has since then been obscured by the Impressionists, Jules Bastien-Lepage, whose *La pauvre fauvette* (1881) could be seen in the original at the 1888 Munich International Exhibition. Réti in his book makes mention, beside "portraits of fine perfection," of his village genres, which were the results of an attempt "to create harmony, under an all-revealing, (so called) grey *plein-air* light, between details and the atmospheric whole, between Holbeinian graphic as well as shape and the modern requirements of airy tones and colours." Detachment from the academic canon and compulsory biblical-mythical topics, the rejection of the brown key of studio settings and the use of black, as well as the development of Bastien-Lepage's naturalist expression constituted the first step towards *plein-air* painting. "Subtle naturalist" masterpieces appeared in succession, like Károly Ferenczy's 1891 treatment of a then popular suburban theme, *Plakátumok előtt* (Before the Billboards), István Csók's melancholic interior, *Az árvák* (The Orphans), which uses almost exclusively shades of blue, or Iványi Grünwald's *Ave Mária* (1891), a far relative of the pre-Raphaelites.

Armoured with a professional knowledge refined on large canvases and with the messianic zeal of young men, the Hollósy group in Munich eagerly awaited their study trip to Nagybánya. The town invited them in 1896, at the suggestion of István Réti and János Thorma, both of whom hailed from there. The initial confidence of the guests soon suffered a setback, as their "subtle naturalist" style, largely relying on theory and perfected in almost laboratory conditions, could not cope with the swiftly changing conditions of light and shadow, was unable to set down shapes melting in the strong sunshine. Though most of them had been to Paris (Hollósy had not), had worked at the Julian Academy, and had seen exhibitions, mostly in the Louvre, they were not familiar with the pictures of the Impressionists. István Csók recalled the Paris period:

Puvis de Chavannes's *Pauvre Pêcheur* considerably weakened Bastien-Lepage's absolute authority, and if the Caillebotte room had been there in the Luxembourg with its wonderful Renoirs, Manets and Degas', if we had had a chance to see the landscapes of Claude Monet and Sisley, our whole view of art may have taken a different course.

In Nagybánya initially they were engaged in examining illumination at dawn and dusk, as well as the effects of light filtering into interiors, and it took years before summer sunlight could eventually play the dominant role on their canvases, in the wake of Hungarian precursors—Mihály Munkácsy's realistic landscapes, Pál Szinyei Merse's early *plein-air* experiments—and foreign inspiration. The summit of this process, emphasised in Réti's book, was the 1903 Károly Ferenczy exhibition in Budapest, where the works displayed had solutions similar to the Im-



pressionists', like the flickering colourful snapshot of *Fürdőzők* (Bathers, 1902) or the soft brushstrokes of *Október* (October, 1903), which nevertheless imparted a stately character to the golden garden scene. The Nagybánya painters approached the pure painterliness of Impressionism, but retaining the organization of the picture, as well as keeping the balance of colour and line remained their highest priorities. With a felicitous expression, Ferenczy called his art "colourist naturalism."

István Réti is not known as a painter of landscapes, his contemporaries too thought of him as a painter of portraits. His were the landscapes of the soul which he produced by a characterization in depth of small-town figures painted in soft brush strikes. Réti represented a conservatism of values, as did Thorma. On the latter's canvases, dramatic scenes are depicted with fiery colours, which flash from a dark background.

It was around the time the founders of the Nagybánya community started gaining recognition—Károly Ferenczy was appointed an instructor at the Academy of Fine Arts in 1906—that a new generation appeared on the scene, which was no longer satisfied with an impressionistic, visional-emotional approach to nature; they sought styles and theoretical footholds independent of their masters. Béla Czóbel in 1905 exhibited at the Salon d'Automne, in the Fauvist hall, and his 1906 pictures, painted in Paris, caused a veritable combustion in Nagybánya. Réti and the others looked with a mixture of bewilderment and curiosity upon the "unfinished" pictures of the young ones, executed in broad brushstrokes and vivid colours. The new generation was most encouraged by Béla Iványi Grünwald's openness.

Young people of the new persuasion gathered mostly around Grünwald, thanks to his orientation. At the same time, a considerable portion of the free school stuck to the old guns, their conviction—after some vacillation—even strengthened. They felt the painstaking study of nature, an attempt to gain a more intimate feeling of the natural vision, could provide their future development with more reliable foundations than the learning and copying of extrinsic elements of style, what in general could be called wanton stylization,

writes Réti. Beside Czóbel, Paris also affected Sándor Galimberti, Valéria Dénes, Sándor Ziffer and Lajos Tihanyi, among others, with a result of radical changes in their styles and choice of subjects (e.g. motives of city life). Their art was closely related to Fauvism, many of them—like Vilmos Perlrott-Csaba, Géza Bornemisza—studied under Matisse. Cubism marked their works in the nineteen-tens, most significantly those of the Hugó Mund-Gizella Dömötör couple. In spite of his cautiousness, Réti was obliged to admit that the appearance of the "neos" gave a new impetus to the life of the colony, though he could not suspect at the time that as a result of the rigorous defence of their own artistic ideals, the leaders of the community between the two wars would be the faithful, though not the most talented, disciples of the Fauvists.



"I evoked the life of times past," says Réti in the coda of his manuscript. Indeed, he treated a period in the history of Hungarian art which, thanks to its complexity and unclassifiable detours, is still among the favourite fields of study in art history. An index with more than a thousand names, and an abundance of hitherto unpublished documents will encourage scholars to further work. The present-day evaluation of the Nagybánya Artists Colony is of course different from Réti's in many respects: though he closes his history in the forties, covering several generations, it is by now clear that the colony could maintain its decisive influence only until the First World War, as after 1905/1906 Budapest became the scene of movements in progressive art. The history of the colony does not end there, of course, as several disciples started their studies there during the war, and in the twenties it became the official summer field-training centre of the Budapest Academy, with Thorma in charge; yet even the occasional work there of successful artists—Vilmos Perlrott-Csaba, János Máttis Teutsch, János Kmetty and others—could not restore its original importance. At the same time, we must note that Nagybánya has established itself not as a scene of nostalgia, but a term in art history which denotes a system that never ceased to mediate between movements in Hungarian as well as international art and the Hungarian tradition, and to offer the result to many new generations of Hungarian artists. ■



István Réti

# The Nagybánya Artists Colony

Excerpts\*

*"At the foot of a crescent of mountains of immense height nestles Nagy-Bánya\*\* with its old-fashioned buildings and Gothic tower, like a piece of the Middle Ages forgotten here by time. Above the town and the whole valley there is a peculiar blue mist, as if the sky had come completely down to earth. You can't believe you're not dreaming, or you think it's just memory, that you're not here now, but have been here long, long ago and spent happy hours here.*

*Sándor Petőfi: Letter to Frigyes Kerényi, 25 May, 1847.*

## 1896—the first year

**O**f necessity, regular work commenced within the school. Hollósy soon posed models—in fine weather they would be in the shade of the big trees—and would come round to adjust them. He never neglected the school. The plein air lighting was a great novelty for pupils and masters alike. Until then, teaching everywhere had been carried out in studios, and Hollósy was initially groping unsurely in unknown territory.

In Munich he had explained portraiture using models, a unidirectionally lighted, rounded form, the regular logic of the studio view, but here, in the open air, forms dissolved, the continually changing light played with colours and painterly values, and figures had barely any tangible, physical appearance—the view was composed of more or less definite patches of colour. Amidst the foliage, the shifting sunlight continually flashed its rays in different places through the translucent depths of the backdrop of emerald greenery, out of which the dishes that were the faces of ceremonially stiff peasant models gleamed with an improbable lustre, all but transfigured, due to the reflected light of the white-bodied clouds poking up from behind the hill. The young painters stood awed and powerless before Nature's magical transformations and beauty, even though some had come already equipped, besides raw talent, with much creditable painterly knowledge and skill.[...]

Before then, acting as a model had been an unknown occupation at Nagy-bánya. Hollósy's school gradually accustomed people to it. János Thorma, to take just one example, had been barely able to persuade even beggars to pose for a couple of hours, for good money too, for such pictures as *The Martyrs of Arad* or *The Sufferers*. Secondary school boys had sat for my own *Bohemians'*

\* István Réti: *A nagybányai művésztelep*. Budapest, Vincze Kiadó, 2001, 196 pp. With colour plates.

\*\* Baia Mare, now Romania.



*Christmas Eve.* The townsfolk were initially suspicious; they just didn't understand what was wanted of them. People from outlying villages were more willing to cooperate: all they had to do was sit, and for that they got a day's pay. Later on the fashion spread to the townspeople as well, first of all amongst the mining people of Veresvíz. That was where many of the young painters lived at the time. The first to pose as models were children, later on adults too, then Gypsies and the village's Romanian and Magyar day-labourers. Of course, there was no question of nude modelling: even some time later, even the men would rarely consent to that. They started to get used to it, though, as time moved on towards the 1910s, and later on even women would pose unclad, mostly peasant girls from the village, some of them stunningly beautiful in the nude. All along they got a day's wage for a day's posing. They would turn up of their own free will every Monday morning, when new models were set, and almost as thronging a market for models eventually grew up as at the College of Art in Budapest. During the First World War, though, the village models all dropped out because they did not have ration coupons that were exchangeable in the town. Before then they had come in from the village for the whole week, only going back home on Saturday night with their earnings. Afterwards it did not prove possible to re-accustom the villagers and the school had to rely solely on Gypsy models.[...]

It was harder to get the painting work going outside the school, however. The promises repeatedly made in Munich, that we were going to sow new seeds at Nagybánya, that a new spring for Hungarian art would start here, were kept up with big words. We were steeling our faith so our will would be strong for what was to come later: action. It was just that, for the meanwhile, the enthusiastic talk was unable to consolidate into appropriate creative activity; in the meanwhile, we merely sought subjects to paint, readied ourselves and sensed we were in a constant state of evolution. We were forever waiting for someone who wasn't there yet, someone who had yet to arrive. A good month passed like this. We simply became intoxicated by the splendid May, then the splendid summer. It was there that we discovered afresh the entire world, the things seen a hundred times over, the beauty of the whole world. We imagined nobody had ever seen this before us—the belief of the young at all times. A more discriminating segment of the town's young sparks allied themselves with great fellow-feeling to the painters' circle, and over time this link deepened with some into warm, life-long friendships, despite their being scattered by fate far from Nagybánya.

### The town

**T**he part of town formed by the hills, along with their orchards, vineyards and, on the upper slopes, dense woods, that rise abruptly, almost without transition, from the plain offered a rich store of motifs for the sort of intimate landscape—



*paysage intime*—called for by the concept of naturalism. From the very beginning painters looked here for subjects to paint, and sought backdrops for their figurative canvases too. Alongside that, the transparently bright air and sparkling sunshine were a spur to developing the Impressionist play of colour and light.

Had painters found themselves there in the first half of the nineteenth century, or mid-century, it is unlikely that these motifs would have inspired their Classicist or Romantic tastes. For Nagybánya also has another part: the big, broad grassland stretching to the south and west of the town. The flatness of the Hungarian plain undulates right up to the point where the closed line of hills suddenly obstructs its path. Biedermeier taste would most likely have settled on this as the part worthy of "depiction".

Painters and public alike at that time revelled much more in broad panoramic sweeps, all-embracing vistas of distant space. Their gaze sought the wide, distant view, blue hills paling in the atmosphere at the edge of the horizon. Foreground shadows and masses of trees or buildings to the side in the middle ground, besides their objective signification, effectively served to lend an enhanced sense of distance to the horizon in the centre. That was what a "landscape" was then.

One sees the same broad panorama today on coming from the west and looking out on the circle of flatland at whose northern and eastern fringe stands the army of sentinel hills beneath which spreads Nagybánya, with its old towers. Arriving from the south, from Transylvania, the panorama is, if anything, even more captivating. Up till the end of the last century, the magnificent Boggy Forest, with its



*View of Nagybánya, 1930s. Unknown photographer.*



massive oaks, was still intact, and one had to pass through this to reach the wide expanses of the bare, broken ground of Rushy Meadow, Nagybánya's Campagna, on whose eastern fringe distant tall peaks loom hazily on their barren, rocky ridges, snow-covered for the greater part of the year. Opposite is the chain of green hills, behind it—ever mounting waves. To the right, by the entrance to the valley of the River Fernezely, shivers a hazy-blue mist, the smoke from the smeltery foundries described so poetically by Petőfi...

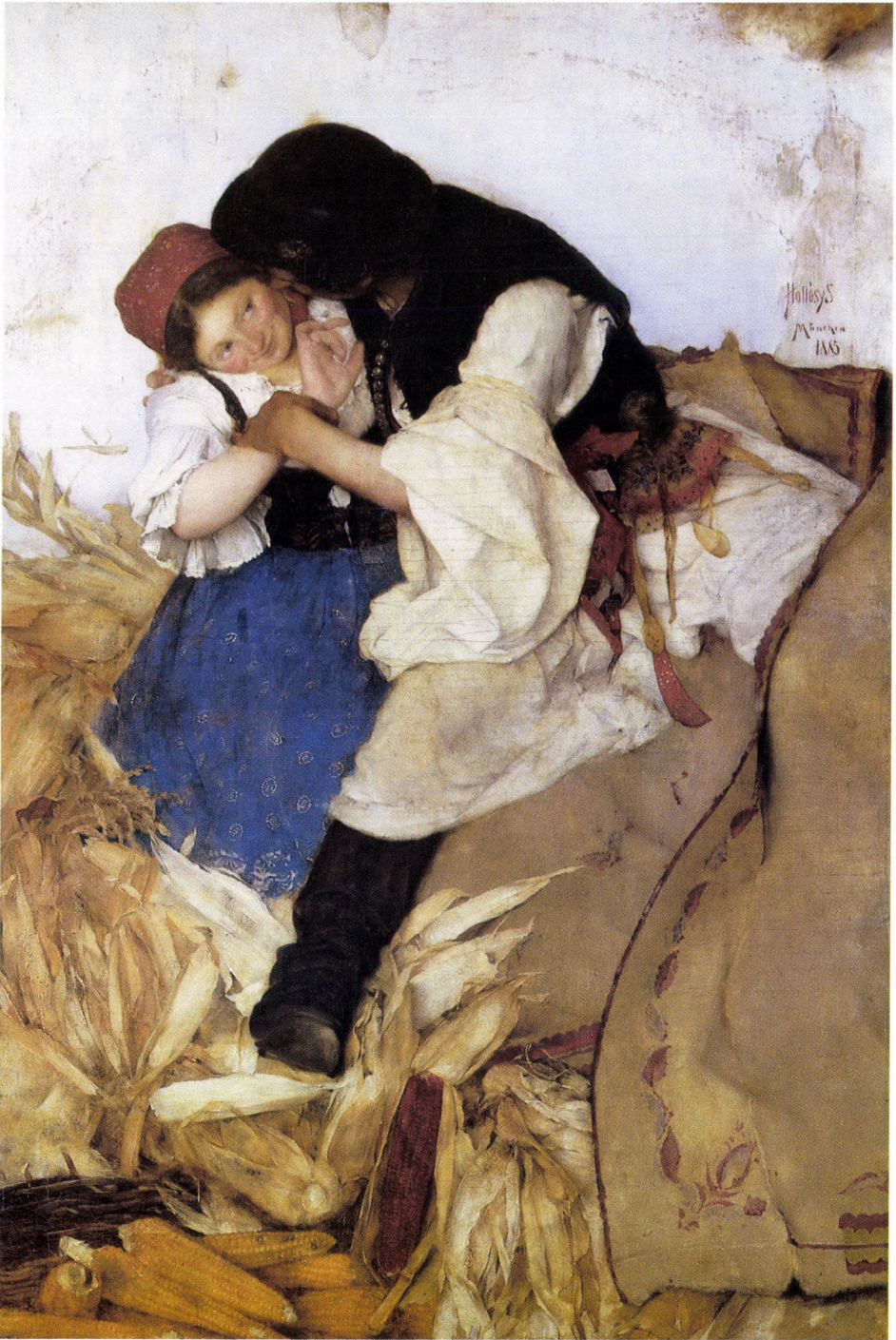
Confronted with this captivating spectacle, Nagybánya's artists sensed that "to grasp all is to lose all": the wonderful vista could not be squeezed in its entirety into a picture-plane that would be taken in at a single glance, its grandiosity could only be imperfectly represented pictorially. The painters therefore broke it down into pictorial elements, what they termed "motifs"; they "entered into" and lived in the landscape. These separated, "internally" viewed slices of landscape, whether accompanied by a figurative composition or not, yielded denser masses and patches of colour, a picture that was also decoratively more substantial, than did grand vistas. This narrow, almost enclosed pictorial space—especially with compositions placed within it—became one of the characteristic features, all but a stylistic hallmark, of the earlier paintings of the Nagybánya school. [...]

Why exactly did Nagybánya become the permanent base for the Nagybánya painters? Many ask, and the question is reasonable. It goes without saying that Nagybánya is pretty, so abounding in pictorial motifs as to be almost unmatched. On one side is the open ground onto which the unobstructed horizon of Hungary's Lowland plain debouches, on the other, in a huge semicircle, are bunches of splendid, undulating hills. A spirit of history floats like a light cloud above its copper-roofed towers and ancient houses, the whole as if it had been clipped out of one of Jósika's novels. The town is guarded from the north and the east by mountains—the smaller ones to the fore. Gentle orchards at the foot of their slopes creep up to steep vine terraces, whilst their brows are crowned by old trees, biblically grave chestnuts. Behind them, in taller crests, range the beech- and oak-clad peaks, and right up on high, above the heads of all of them, the distant blueness of the gigantic, crook-backed craggy spine of Black Mountain, Rosali and Gutin.

### The group

**T**he fact that the group of artists held together as friends, and the shared features of its artistic character, can be put down to three main reasons. The first, as already discussed, was a shared point of departure, a shared training in art; they all set off at once at the dawn of one and the same concept, and they reached its meridian together. The second factor was a kindred intellectual and ethical refinement which permitted human and artistic coexistence, consolidated and likewise formed many shared inner traits in their art. The third, and artistically, perhaps, the most important, formative factor in the art of the Nagybánya





*Simon Hollósy (1857–1918): Corn Huskers, 1885. Oil on canvas, 150x100 cm. Hungarian National Gallery.*





*Károly Ferenczy (1862–1917):  
Bird Song, 1893.  
Oil on canvas, 105x77.5 cm.  
Hungarian National Gallery*



*János Thorma (1870–1937):  
Peasant Shelling Peas, 1910.  
Oil on canvas, 70x61.5 cm.  
Hungarian National Gallery.*





*Károly Ferenczy (1862–1917): October, 1903. Oil on canvas, 127x108 cm.  
Hungarian National Gallery.*



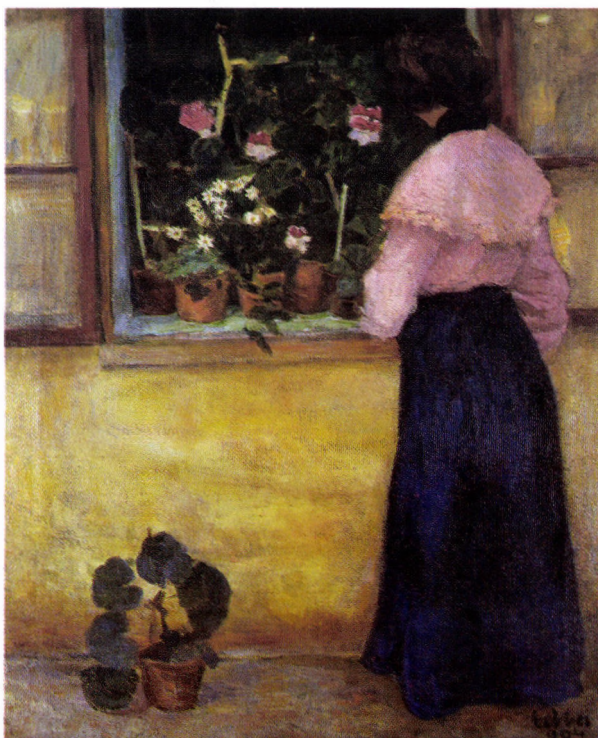


*István Réti (1872–1945): Old Women, 1900. Oil on canvas, 79.5x65.3 cm.  
Hungarian National Gallery.*





*Béla Iványi Grünwald*  
(1867–1940):  
*Washing on the Line, 1903.*  
*Oil on canvas, 166x133 cm.*  
*Hungarian National Gallery.*



*Béla Czóbel (1883–1976):*  
*Girl at a Window with Flowers,*  
*1904.*  
*Oil on canvas, 105x87 cm.*  
*Czóbel Museum, Szentendre.*





*Tibor Boromisza (1880–1960): View of Nagybánya, ca. 1911. Oil on canvas, 80x125 cm.  
Private collection.*

*Vilmos Perrott-Csaba (1880–1955): Family, ca. 1928. Oil on canvas, 80x98.5 cm.  
Private collection.*







Vilmos Perrott-Csaba (1880–1955): View of Nagybánya, ca. 1910. Oil on canvas, 64x46 cm. Private collection:





*Sándor Ziffer (1880–1962):  
Red Gate, 1908.  
Oil on canvas, 55.5x65 cm.  
Private collection.*



*Gizella Dömötör (1894–1984):  
Gipsy Model, 1915.  
Oil on canvas, 96x61 cm.  
Private collection.*



school were the natural features of Nagybánya itself. [...]

This was an effect not just of the local character of the motifs, nor just of the air and lighting, but of the close and exclusive relationship that our artists achieved with Nature here. On settling down at Nagybánya, they broke completely with the locality and influence of their earlier work and schools. Thereafter, for a long succession of years, for more than a decade, not one—apart from Thorma—went back to Paris or Munich. The memory of art galleries and exhibitions soon faded; nothing stood between them and Nature, and there was nothing beyond Nature on which they could have fallen back. They were left totally to their own devices.



*István Réti around 1904. Unknown photographer.*

In the initial period after their arrival they marvelled at becoming conscious of a new world that was unfamiliar to them from pictures or books. It was as if their lungs were filling for the first time with spring air, their eyes seeing light rays for the first time. Some ten to twenty visually intoxicated people happily showed one another new wonders, new quarry trapped by their eyes. Over time, as they sculled out onto the deeper waters of work, that collective rapture became detached and retreated into the depths of each one's soul.

In the first rush of new sights and impressions, their painting would be hesitant, laggardly in keeping abreast with their feelings. They did not consciously set about whatever they latched on to, nor did they give themselves over unconsciously and entirely to whatever grabbed their attention. They would grope around, seeking a link between the new intimations and their previous artistic intentions. Their notion that the profundity of artistic creativity depended solely on the emotional profundity of what a man had to say often blinded their eyes to Nature's new spectacles. Thus it was that in the first years barely a thought was given to painting landscapes unless, possibly, they were figurative. Even there,



man was what was of prime interest, and they would regard the countryside more temperamentally than with the eyes; for all that were continually enthused by its beauties, they had little idea what to make of it unless it hinted at a verbally explicit subject related to man.

It was all too rarely that Nagybánya's Nature bestowed on them the gift of those fortunate inspirations in which the pictorial and the human message were entwined inwardly, of their own accord. Yet the constant presence of Nature's splendours increasingly took hold of them, not allowing them to create without her or merely allocate to her a subordinate, background role. The countryside became ingrained in their eyes, tyrannized the subjects of their heart; she was loath to assist if they were not going to talk about her. This struggle, in which the inner image-composing intuition was at odds with the ever-present compulsion of the visual experiences supplied by external reality, carried on almost continuously within us for years. Though this was not unheard of in art, virtually all of the Nagybánya painters suffered particularly from this inner mental strife, and its detrimental effect showed in their productivity. [...]

Ferenczy was the first, then [Iványi] Grünwald, to spot the way out of the conflict: they gave themselves over entirely to the direct influence of external Nature, and their landscapes for their own sake signalled this inner capitulation before the compelling beauty of Nagybánya's landscape. Later on, the other Nagybánya regulars gradually—after many inner defeats—went through this same transformation. Landscape had generally played a minor role in the art of these members, and it pushed but slowly to the forefront. They found it more difficult to surrender, and for that reason their creative work was more uneven, scantier and more laboured.

The mood of the countryside reflects sensitively from the soul of every one of them. This sensitivity to mood was very one-sided at first. Romantically inclined young temperaments were inspired solely by the fading, self-effacing tints of melancholy twilights and mournful evenings; they had not recognized as yet the clamorous *joie de vivre* of broad sunlight. A sense of *decrecendo* also bestrode compositions suggested by the countryside. In these pictures sunlight had, at best, just taken its leave or was kissing a first blush of dawn onto land and figures. That is how we see it in the pictures of Ferenczy, Grünwald, Réti and Glatz during those early years. [...]

As landscape and a form of composition that, both artistically and in content, was fused into a unity with it evolved in this direction, a new pictorial interest and principle began gradually, almost unnoticed, to give a new aspect to the art of the Nagybánya artists colony. This new interest was directed towards the effects of intense sunlight, and the new principle was that of pure, unalloyed painterliness. The cascade of light pouring down from the summer sun overhead, the brilliant, iridescent atmosphere, the Nagybánya sky, that crystal-clear, deep cerulean infinity in which silvery clouds soar and evaporate—none of this



inspired our painters artistically to begin with. It was only as the century turned that they started to wake up to the peculiar strength of Nagybánya's sunlight, its compactly wrought, dark-green vegetation, the lustre of the air, clear and transparent even in summer. But then it pushed to the fore as the painter's task: that purple-white blaze of the Nagybánya sunshine which fires the flare of colours to the utmost and, at the same time, deprives local colours of their independence, dissolving them in the unity of its own light. The effort demanded in solving this task naturally relegated all literary and associative elements in their endeavours to the background.

### Károly Ferenczy

In that very first half of May an elegant, taciturn person moved in amongst us in Nagybánya, who was subsequently to stay with us until the end of his life. This was Károly Ferenczy.

I mentioned earlier that in Munich he had not formed part of Hollósy's regular coffee-house circle, strictly speaking, but both Hollósy and Béla Grünwald were already acquainted with him from before, though I personally had only got to know him the previous winter. Over the winter [of 1895–96], Ferenczy had begun to turn up amongst us in Munich with ever greater frequency; it seemed the company was to his taste and he was interested in the plans we were hatching then for the expedition to Nagybánya. We therefore welcomed him to Nagybánya with genuine brotherly affection. A month later his family too arrived, and later on all his furniture from Munich. From that point on Nagybánya became their home.[...]

Ferenczy was a smart, slightly alien figure in Nagybánya, with an indefinable English stamp to his apparel and his whole bearing. A tall, slim young man, still only 34 years old, with blue eyes, a thick head of brown hair, a full moustache—a dutiful copy of his *Self-Portrait* in the Ernst Collection. He must have felt a bit like a young British officer who is sent to do service in a remote Indian garrison—in some short story by Rudyard Kipling, naturally—and takes along with him into this alien world his golf clubs, his bath tub, his tea pot, his books and his habitual pattern of life.

Grey *plein air* and simple depiction of nature were his starting-point during his period in Paris and Munich; Nagybánya further developed his art in terms of its mood and spiritual content. Here it was no longer the uniform daylight of overcast skies but the evening or a forest darkness that gave his pictures their atmosphere. He would shroud his compositions in the bluish veil of twilight or the dwindling, warm rays of a setting sun, always thinking of the decorative effect of a patch of colour—what he called its pictorial quality.

When he arrived in Nagybánya, the flood of light of the summer sun or the sky's glittering, luminous azure were of no interest to him. Only at the end of the 1890s, whilst he was reading a book on art (Geoffroy's *La vie artistique*), did he suddenly tumble to the peculiar intensity of Nagybánya's sunshine, the brilliance



of its air. From that point onwards, the white blaze of summer was increasingly to become his sole subject, when thought itself swoons in the great luminosity of the sun high in the sky, there is no literary association, only panting, near-insensible life.

It was not purely for this natural reason that he excluded the element of literary association from his pictures, but also by deliberate design. At this time, his mind was formulating, with all the strictness of dogma, the principle of pure pictoriality as a more highly advanced, differentiated way of painting whose sole subjects were line, form, value, colour and light, and whose sole purpose was the agreeable visual sensation, the optic delight, that could be elicited by these means. In practice, of course, he could not entirely eliminate human curiosity and imagination from his pictures, but the intellect seized the initiative in directing his work, and this direction aligned itself to his programme of pure pictoriality.[...]

Every fresh overview or inspection of the totality of his works clearly demonstrates that Ferenczy's art comes from a unity like that of the roots, trunk and branches of a tree—and that cannot be said of the *oeuvre* of all his artist contemporaries. The cultural soil of that tree—his art—was Europe. In order: Italy, Paris, Munich. That was where he first put out his roots and nourished his slender, young stem, from there that he imbibed his initial influences, from there that the basic elements of his knowledge came. Out of the elements of this cultural soil, from these roots and this stem, were to unfurl the expansive boughs of his species of Nagybánya art, with the singular aroma and slight tartness of its noble fruit.

### Simon Hollósy

**A** camp of fanatical disciples swirled around Hollósy, listening to him as to an apostle. It would have been awkward to invest him with the forbidding-sounding title of "Professor" or the affected title of "Master"; he was most reluctant to accept this form of address in his school, and if uninformed Germans or other foreigners chose to address him so none the less, in his own words—with reference to Petőfi's simile—he felt "as if he were itchy and not permitted to scratch."

His forthrightness and warmth only made the links with the artists around him all the closer. He, for his part, considered his more talented, more knowledgeable pupils—very fairly—as artists, and when he stood before one or another of their better works he would tell them as much or, as a more special mark of praise, would give them a hearty handshake. As time went by he switched to the familiar second-person singular *te* with his longer-standing, more favoured pupils. At that time this familiarity had not yet become devalued into a general social custom, even amongst those of the same age and rank; Hollósy's use of the familiar *te* counted at least as much to his pupils, in moral terms, as a gold medal or some other distinction from the Academy.



It was these traits, to put it briefly, that were the basis of the renowned personal influence with which he built up such an enthusiastic band around himself. Yet, over and beyond the personal charisma, his teaching equally possessed that same special intellectual weight as his first larger canvas. It was not only his overwhelming individuality, his stimulating, riddling manner of speaking and deeply probing correctional marks, that attracted youthful spirits and held them captive but also the spirit of his teaching, with its orientation towards the French light radiating from the West. [...]

Hollósy did not like it if anyone left his school [in Munich] for Paris: he told me that much as soon as we first became acquainted. What he wanted was to be alone in training somebody from first to last. But after a while everyone cast his eyes towards Paris, however great a disciple he may have been of the master. Paris was the most exalted rung to which one could aspire. He was piqued at Thorma, and later on at me as well, though only transiently of course, for moving on from his school after just two years. As to what opinion he held of my own capabilities, for a long time I could only guess from the information that others passed on. Any laudatory boost he may have given me was no more than what he had also said to others on occasion. When, on returning from my first spell in Paris, I had shown him a sketch of the idea behind my first picture, *Bohemians' Christmas Eve*, it appealed to him but, it seems, he considered it too difficult a task for me, because he asked, "Do you reckon Bastien-Lepage would have dared tackle a subject like that?" The advice he gave on the little sketch in oil, though, which despite the identical subject-matter differed considerably from the subsequent full-size picture, was to condense the composition, to draw the three figures more tightly together. When I exhibited this picture in Budapest in December of that year [1893], and he learned that it had been purchased for the Museum of Fine Arts, I received an express letter from him: "I have read that your picture was purchased for the Museum—a thousand cheers! Send me 100-150 forints immediately, by wire; and if you don't have the money yourself, go on the scrounge until you come up with it! I'll give it back as and when I get a bigger sum of money." To be fair to him, he did indeed pay me back, and at a time when I really needed it.

### János Thorma

There were many so-called literary elements in his view of life. The world was of interest to him not just pictorially, visually, but also emotionally, in terms of its inner content. These two perspectives—that of the painter and that of the writer—were unified in him through his imagination and his heart. Feelings and thoughts that another would express in words would, with him, manifest themselves immediately as images, in a visual format. I have never met any other painter who conceptualized so much in terms of images, nor did I meet anyone



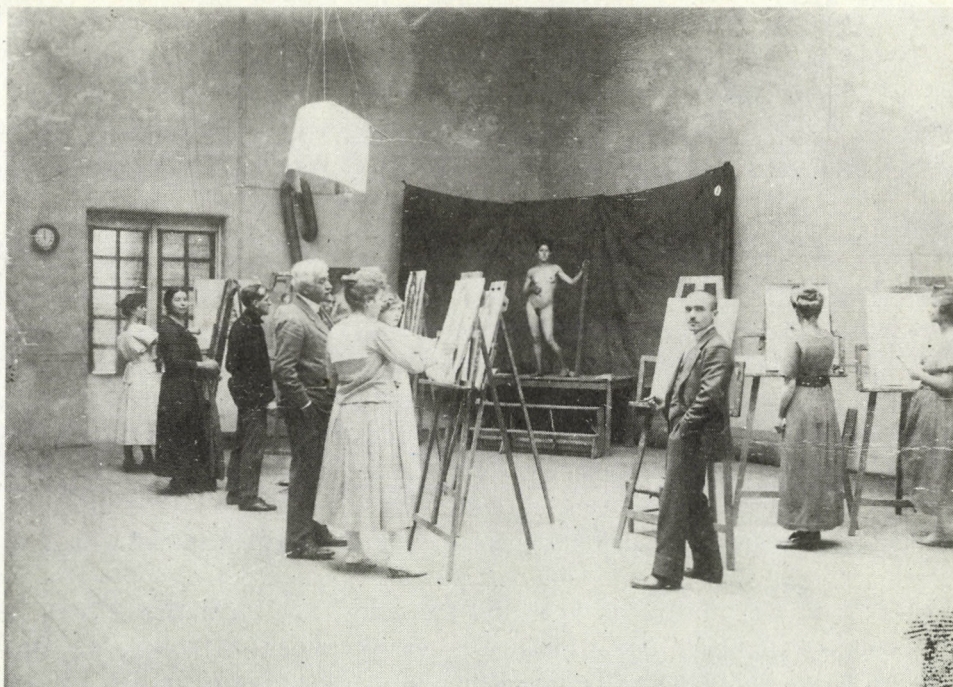
who had a richer pictorial imagination and inventiveness along such lines. One only has to look at his pictures: even in his most crowded compositions, no figure is a purely formal "extra", there merely to fill in a space. Each figure also has its separate life even as it acts and behaves in close relation to, and co-existent with, the whole, whether we scrutinize the scene of newly inducted army recruits at the train station in *The First of October* or the excited, milling throng of *Rise, Hungarians!* Every figure has not just a formal but also an inner life and role.

In truth, the only thing that interested him at heart, albeit by way of his eyes, was man. In his insight into and empathy with the individual person at rest he perhaps did not plumb such depths as Hollósy did in one or another fragment of his contemplative intuition. Thorma had far more empathy for active, suffering and passionate people; he wanted to evince them in a thousand variations in the throes of their emotional animation, amidst their human circumstances and events. Hollósy's searching imagination considered it could sense an entire destiny in a person's look, a half-opened mouth, an inert, involuntary gesture. His literariness was concealed in his perception of the individual person. Thorma was inspired by the reality of an individual when something happened to that person and he or she reacted to it. His imagination perceived life's events and incidents, and he imbued its forms of external manifestation with an inner content. His was a narrative type of painting; he openly admitted to its literary tendencies. He sought a way of universally expressing the outer and inner life of people in his big, historical canvases just as in his smaller genre paintings. Later on, in turn, the tense excitement of his big paintings gave way to the idyll, to landscape for its own sake, passion to contemplation, drama to lyricism—imperceptibly so, just as the coursing of his blood likewise slowed with advancing age. Over time, he underwent a gradual transformation in his art, but this happened organically, for entirely internal, natural reasons, not in the wake of extrinsic influences or artistic fashions. It did not affect the originality of his individuality or the inner unity of his art that Paris had given the artistic inspiration for his first paintings whereas Nagybánya was the *genius loci* of his later works.

### Béla Iványi Grünwald

**H**ardly any other notable Hungarian painter's work is so hard to catalogue as his. He painted so much, and in so many different ways, that it is virtually impossible to provide a coherent summary, especially of those from the post-Nagybánya period. Certainly, his output up to 1907 displays a more organically coherent, less disjointed line than subsequently, the final years excepted, when his taste and view of reality once more took on a certain affinity with the pick of the Nagybánya-school paintings. At the start of his prolific life he had helped pave the way for the revival in Hungarian art. He was one of the early members of the





*János Thorma with his pupils, 1920s. Unknown photographer.*

Nagybánya artists colony, an ardent warrior in their endeavours and a participant in their successes. He was at one with his companions in his ideals and enthusiasm; his artistic path brought him close to them, and he worked in complete harmony with them humanly speaking as well. His personality contributed greatly to the development of the friendly atmosphere that gave Nagybánya its moral grace and was one of the key elements in its intellectual influence. He was a generous, soft-hearted, impulsive man, without envy or resentment. Theorizing and strict methodicalness lay far from his nature. His determinedly optimistic imagination easily bridged any real or apparent difficulty or obstacle, thawed the ice of cold punctiliousness, calmed waves of unrest with a reassuring gesture.

It was his feel for colour and harmony that was the dominant value in his artistic output. Delineation that called for rigorous exactitude, whether as a concrete, naturalistic, formal totality, let alone in abstract, stylizing, outline form, was not his forte. The variable but, in principle, quasi-scientifically regular element of reality, delineation, form and construction ran counter to his intellectual temperament as a man of changes. We know a few works, from the period when he was under the direct influence of the teaching of foreign schools and the principles of naturalism, that he sketched with exceptional absorption and affection, but on the whole the art of changes and fleeting impressionism was much better suited to him. That was the spirit in which his most accomplished works



were conceived and within whose framework his superb sense of colour came across best. His decorative, stylizing art was also characterized primarily by a pleasing colour-harmony. An unconscious feel for balance directed his effortless, flexible compositional flair in placing a mass and patches of colour harmoniously and agreeably within the pictorial space at his disposal. How much of that compositional assurance he had taken from his apprenticeship with Károly Lotz and Bertalan Székely we shall never know, but his personality assimilated that too, just as it did later influences, wantonly failing to preserve any of them for any length of time.

### Neo-impressionism

**N**eo-impressionism was the term applied to the diverse forms of post-impressionism when they first made their appearance in Hungary, prior to 1910, and those who cultivated the new trends were known as "neos". Both sobriquets originated from the painters themselves, and the latter, in particular, lingered for a long time in the studio and coffee-house argot of contemporary artists. It was only in writings on art that the various new enterprises were subsequently differentiated under the names of expressionism, cubism, futurism, etc. In Nagybánya, initially, the appellation of neo-impressionism was not entirely unfounded, for there the new endeavours really did bear recognizable stylistic hallmarks of that school in the narrower sense. The first experiments of this kind were characterized by pointillist splashes of colour confined within thick contours of ultramarine, along with a certain harking back to the truthful display or, to put it better, impressionistic rendering of light. Figurative paintings, however, were more poster-like in character. That stylistic uniformity later broke up, splintering into a multiplicity of individual expressionisms, with reference to a diversity of theories and explanations. Since they surged, one after the other, through the art of the era over the course of several decades, these stylistic phenomena—or "isms", if you like—are what I collectively call "neo-modern" art, in distinction to the one-time modernity of the Nagybánya school's paintings.

### The trade

**A** certain type of trade in art also grew up in Nagybánya. The initiative in this was taken by the master-confectioner Gyula Gyöngyössi on completely unselfish grounds, in full accord with the noble spirit of old Nagybánya. He had the idea of placing the rooms of his pâtisserie at the artists' disposal for the purposes of providing a permanent exhibition space. In order to ensure that standards were maintained, he asked the school's leading painters to judge the submitted pictures. He also undertook to act as middleman in selling the pictures, without taking any cut of the price. He did this at a time (in 1909) when the colony was



undergoing one of its most critical periods. Iványi Grünwald was preparing to take himself off to Kecskemét, along with the greater part of the youngsters; the principals who were staying were considering the closure of the painting school, whilst the townspeople viewed the whole affair with indifference or indeed, in many cases, hostility. Gyöngyössi defied this mood in both word and deed. He was well acquainted with the painters from his confectionery shop, had heard about their troubles from their conversations, and believed he would be helping the younger ones, albeit modestly, with the venture. During the two or three years that were still left of this admirable man's life (up till 1912), he did indeed manage to drum up a good few thousand of crowns' worth of turnover from the pictures. On our persuasion, he latterly began to take a minimal percentage cut from the price of pictures that were sold, but he used that money to take out subscriptions for the patisserie to various illustrious art magazines, later donating the complete volumes at the end of the year to the painting school's library, thereby performing a double service for the cause of art.

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Up until 1918, Nagybánya attained a significant role in forming Hungary's young artists, both practically and theoretically speaking. During these two decades, the names of Nagybánya and Paris came to feature alongside one another in the yearly timetables and work programmes of the majority of these youngsters. The two places complemented one another in their development. Between these two destinations, Munich was gradually dropped altogether, whilst Budapest began to gain greater prestige in the eyes of the more progressive youth when the ideals of Nagybánya and the artists themselves, bit by bit, gained ground and made their way into the art training college.

I wish here to refer only briefly to a few of the more conspicuous pieces of factual evidence that this latter claim is no exaggeration. One of the first acts of Pál Színyei Merse, whom the Nagybánya colony regarded as an artistic predecessor and who himself had a very high opinion of the Nagybánya painters, on becoming director of the Royal School of Design [in 1905], soon [in 1908] to be elevated into the Academy of Fine Arts, was to bring in Károly Ferenczy as a teacher. It was likewise on his suggestion that Pál Majovszky subsequently invited István Réti in 1913, Oszkár Glatz in 1914, and in 1915 Károly Lyka as a lecturer in the history of art. ■

*Translated by Tim Wilkinson*



Gábor Ébli

# A Museum Director Who Made Modern Art Come Alive

Elek Petrovics (1873–1945)

Modern art has had a troubled history in Hungary and galleries and museums face an important and difficult task in showing it. The Hungarian National Gallery is preparing a complete overhaul of its permanent exhibition of 19th and 20th-century Hungarian art. This institution came into being in 1957, amalgamating the Hungarian collections of the Museum of Fine Arts and of the Municipal Gallery of Budapest, both established about fifty years earlier.

For the National Gallery, collecting and exhibiting was under ideological constraints imposed by the regime until the 1980s. Options to acquire and show contemporary works were specifically limited. Yet, the conventions of the two public collections that provided its initial holdings involved several innovative models for the showing of modern art. Current efforts of the National Gallery to provide a wide and consistent survey of modern Hungarian art can be related to certain patterns of museum work before the Second World War. Elek Petrovics, Director of the Museum of Fine Arts between 1914 and 1935, was

among the country's most successful museum administrators, greatly enlarging and refining the modern art collections and exhibitions.

*"Les années passées au service de l'art, je les ai vraiment vécues; quant au reste, je l'ai seulement revé."* This comment by Petrovics was the epigraph to his *Festschrift* in the twentieth year of his directorship. A year later, in 1935, Petrovics was prematurely retired, as the conservative policy of the day rejected his enthusiasm for modern art. The struggle of a director with political incomprehension and hostility is a recurring motif in the history of Hungarian museums. A conservative country—with a defiant cultural élite joining modern trends—Hungary has repeatedly called for, and often victimized, the personal commitment of heads of museums in publicizing modern art.<sup>1</sup>

Petrovics was only one among a number of museum directors whose mission was compromised by policies. Ferenc and Károly Pulszky—directors, respectively, of the National Museum (1869–1894) and of the National Picture Gallery (1884–1896),

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forerunner of the Museum of Fine Arts—were the first outstanding Hungarian curators. Ferenc Pulszky successfully kept a balance between renewal and conservation in making parts of the universal collections of the National Museum independent and in developing the core historical holdings for national representation. By contrast, the younger Pulszky fell victim to his commitment to expand the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts: his acquisitions in Italy (1893–94) provoked false allegations of embezzlement; he had to resign, and his project was aborted.<sup>2</sup>

A rare example of success was Jenő Radisics, director of the Museum of Applied Arts between 1896 and 1917. This golden quarter-century of the Museum only came to an end with the truncation of Hungary after 1919. Radisics proved an efficient administrator, with a modernizing vocation in collecting and exhibiting, as well as a commitment to museum education and publishing, which spanned historical and contemporary fields in the applied arts. He was consistently supported by the government, private patronage and professional critics. Yet, the success of his programme rested on the practical function of the applied arts collections, and this was hardly applicable to the 'high art' collections of the Museum of Fine Arts.

At this museum, Károly Pulszky's successor was already confronted with numerous obstacles before the First World War. Gábor Térey—who was *de facto* in charge between 1896 and 1914—was an erudite scholar, Jacob Burckhardt's pupil, and a member of Thomas Mann's circle as a *Privatdozent* in Germany. The director *en titre*, Ernő Kammerer, who was not an art historian, gave Térey a free hand in curatorial matters, and supervised only the construction and administration of the Museum. Yet Térey, although a diplomatic navigator as Head of the Section

of Painting in the National Fine Arts Council, was also caught up by Pulszky's fate.

When Pulszky's original project for the large-scale acquisitions of European art could not be continued, Térey initiated the transfer of private collections to the Museum of Fine Arts. That versatile collector, Marcell Nemes, exhibited his treasures in the Museum of Fine Arts in 1910. Térey, who catalogued the collection, was engaged in providing price estimates for the works, and in arranging the details of the deal with Nemes. The Museum's precursor, the Esterházy Gallery, had come into public ownership in a similar way when the state purchased Prince Esterházy's collection in 1872. A Térey–Nemes agreement would have revived that arrangement, potentially inducing other collectors to put their collections into public ownership. Instead, Térey was attacked, out of sheer envy and owing to the latent anti-Semitism directed against Nemes, and the deal fell through. This mishap disqualified Térey from formally replacing Kammerer as director in 1914, and Nemes's collection—known for the El Greco works and a range of modern French canvases—was auctioned off in Paris in 1913. No later effort ever succeeded in channelling private collections of first-rate European art into public ownership in Hungary.<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, Pulszky's and Térey's achievements became an integral part of Hungarian public collections. The works they bought, the scholarly rigour they introduced to collection management and the international positioning of the museum through their colleagues abroad, proved valuable. As the years before the First World War closed the gap between progressive thought and bourgeois radicalism among the intelligentsia and political decisions, even Térey's disqualification



could be discounted.<sup>4</sup> The noted collector and liberal politician Béla Jánosi, as Minister of Religious Affairs and Education in 1914, consented to the appointment of Elek Petrovics as a successor to Kammerer. The selection proved to be well-justified; and Petrovics continued the work of Pulszky and Térey.

In fact, Petrovics turned out to be uniquely successful in combining museum interests with private collecting and philanthropy. No other Hungarian director in history has ever matched his skill in securing non-governmental support for a public collection, and in furthering the civic constituency of the Museum. As Petrovics' tenure covered the crossroads of two opposing tendencies—the liberalism of the 'long nineteenth century' against the conservative political turn and economic crisis in Hungary after 1920—his mission required considerable skills.<sup>5</sup>

His foremost task was to steer the Museum of Fine Arts through political conflicts, notably the upheavals of 1918–1919. During the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919, the Museum of Fine Arts had professional rather than political reasons for participating in the nationalization of private collections. After the collapse of the Republic, the collections were returned without loss to their owners; and Petrovics stood by his Museum colleagues who had been active in 1919. While this moral consistency would grow into the basis of trust that supporters of the Museum put in him, the conservative restoration after September 1919 removed curator Kálmán Pogány from the Museum of Fine Arts, and forced the leading art historians Ernő Kállai, Frigyes Antal, János Wilde and Charles de Tolnay into exile. Their absence—paralleled by the emigration of progressive artists, moving mostly to Austria and Germany after 1919—badly weakened the position of modern art in Hungary.

Securing the financial means and professional independence of the Museum was critical, given a continually austere state budget and governmental interference with cultural institutions after 1919. Aware of this, Petrovics thought of directing the Museum of Fine Arts as a practical rather than a bureaucratic challenge. He looked to Wilhelm von Bode, museum director in Berlin, as an exemplar. Two elements in museum work re-surfaced in Petrovics' strategy: solid art historical knowledge, and co-operation with private collectors and financiers, especially in the circle of the Museum's friends. Such an association of the patrons of museums came into being in Berlin, on Bode's initiative, as early as 1895 and was to be mobilized in Budapest too.

In conjunction, fundamental changes in modern art followed quickly after 1914. Petrovics had to integrate focus on Old Masters with a sensitivity for modern art, and to accommodate shifts within modern art as oppositional as the radicalization of the avant-garde up to 1919 vs. its sudden cooling down thereafter. He proved a sensitive curator even though he had no formal training in the field. Trained in law, he had worked in the Ministry of Interior until his appointment. Befriended by the progressive cultural elite, he belonged to the inner circle of bourgeois radicalism centred around individuals such as Oszkár Jászi and Ervin Szabó; indeed, he was a regular member of the Artists' Circle that met in the Café Japán.

The leading lights of this informal, yet influential circle, Pál Majovszky (an official in the Ministry of Education, himself a foremost collector) and the doyen of Hungarian *plein-air* painting, Pál Szinyei Merse, soon came to appreciate Petrovics's merits. It was their advice that convinced the minister, Béla Jánosi, to appoint Petrovics to head the Museum of Fine Arts



in 1914. While putting trust in a civil servant without formal training in art history meant deviating from established conventions, the counsel was wise. By 1914, Petrovics, free of scholarly dogmatism, had accumulated a thorough knowledge of art history, and developed a refined taste, wider than many art historians of the age. In co-operation with Simon Meller—Head of the Graphics Department of the Museum between 1901 and 1922, when he, too, was forced into exile—Petrovics and his friends in the Café Japán not only animated collecting activity, but also initiated the noted private institutions of the Ernst Museum, and the Szinyei Society of Artists.<sup>6</sup>

**P**etrovics published his programme for the Museum of Fine Arts on assuming directorship.<sup>7</sup> In examining public collecting in the second half of the 19th century, he observed shortcomings in the amateur approach and a narrow historicizing taste. Efforts had improved after the formal set-up of the Museum of Fine Arts (1896), yet the decades up to the First World War barely sufficed to complete the transition to a proper museum. His new priorities aimed to promote the Museum to the position of an acknowledged arbiter of taste. For this, several artists, periods, genres, and stylistic trends would need to be complemented (e.g., Mihály Munkácsy), systematized (Simon Hollósy), re-evaluated (Bertalan Székely) and highlighted (József Rippl-Rónai).

Collecting Hungarian art systematically was indispensable since there was no other institution doing this. Leading painters had to be represented with works from all their styles, showing quality works as much as preparatory phases. Research needed to precede buying: works for the Museum had to be sought out in the market, instead of accepting works offered haphazardly. Mere quantitative enlarge-

ment was a waste of funds; minor artists had to be given their place but within limits. Given the shortage of foreign currency in post-war isolation, foreign acquisitions had to be selective: funds could only be spent on key works. French art from the Barbizon School to Impressionism and beyond, German schools (because of their relation to Hungarian artists) and Hungarian artists studying or living abroad had to be catered for.

To make an example of the 'living eye of the curator' at work, Petrovics took charge of the Department of Modern Art. This was the first time the Museum had a director fully committed to modern art. He had been close friends for some time with the leading collector of the age, Baron Ferenc Hatvany, and artists as varied as Károly Ferenczy, the doyen of the Nagybánya artists colony, Rippl-Rónai, a former Nabi in France, and Károly Kernstok, head of the early avant-garde group 'The Eight'.<sup>8</sup> Relying on his own preferences as much as on the advice of artist friends, Petrovics changed the accents of the permanent exhibition.

Following the first version of the permanent show of modern art, selected by the two foremost artists, Szinyei and Ferenczy in 1906, as well as the revision of this selection by Térey in 1913, the third hanging of the modern collection by Petrovics in 1920 included two hundred works never shown earlier. Classicism to Romanticism formed the first epoch (3 rooms), Hungarian students of Rahl and Piloty in the Vienna and Munich academies in the middle of the 19th century another (2 rooms), Naturalism and its follow-up a third (3 rooms). The latter started with *plein-air* and rural still-life (Hollósy, Deák-Ébner), and advanced to Ferenczy and the artists colony in Nagybánya, as well as painters from Szolnok and the Great Hungarian Plain.



This chronological backbone was supplemented by rooms of early modern foreign art, and rooms devoted to four Hungarian masters, the 'classics of modern art': Munkácsy, László Paál, Székely and Szinyei. Paál and Munkácsy had long been canonized, and Szinyei's position had been established for over a decade, but Bertalan Székely's proper appreciation required Petrovics' focus on his pictorial and psychological strength in moving beyond academic history painting. These characteristics rightly lifted Székely above related painters such as Gyula Benczúr, Viktor Madarász and Károly Lotz, who had enjoyed greater popularity in their lifetime. A breakthrough of equal importance was the reservation of one cabinet for József Rippl-Rónai.

Temporary exhibitions of new acquisitions complemented this permanent display. Acquisitions were published in the museum bulletin, itself initiated by Petrovics; and the new intake was shown every other year in an exhibition with a catalogue of its own. Separate showing let new works stand out; it encouraged the public to come to the Museum regularly, and compare new acquisitions with the permanent exhibition; equally this prevented curators from subsiding in passivity. Although the acquisitions budget amounted to less than one-tenth of the pre-war level, Petrovics found a way out of the financial swamp. Relying on his credit as a civil servant and his good communication skills, he built a circle of friends around the Museum. From the first years on, the new acquisition records included gifts, bequests, donations and purchases via charity subscription. A variety of art lovers came to assist the Museum of Fine Arts: Marcell Nemes presented a Maillol figure, Baron Adolf Kohner gave Szinyei's epoch-marking canvas *Skylark*, Tivadar Lándor a series of works by Székely,

Imre Oltványi contributed *Self-portrait in Sunshine* by József Egry.

Some of these acquisitions channelled back to Hungary pieces from Marcell Nemes's collection. Cézanne's *Buffet* had come to Nemes from Ambroise Vollard's gallery in Paris; at the 1913 Nemes auction in Paris it was bought by Baron Ferenc Hatvany, to be donated by him to the Museum in 1917. Courbet's *Rocky Landscape* was acquired by Nemes in the second phase of his collecting, after his emigration to Munich following the First World War; this was bought at the second Nemes auction in 1931—with the help of subscriptions—by Petrovics.<sup>9</sup>

**B**esides the benefit of these gestures, their wider impact was the restoration of art patronage to a higher status. Hungarian aristocrats and the haute bourgeoisie created choice collections from the 1890s onwards. The disruptions between 1914 and 1919 put a halt to this.<sup>10</sup> Petrovics himself published an overview of collecting, from its recent origins thanks to the Counts Andrassy—father and son, both ministers in different Hungarian cabinets before 1914—to the country's greatest collection by Mór Herzog, and the various collections of the Hatvany family.<sup>11</sup>

Next to these collections that had an international profile, the specifically Hungarian collections of Wertheimer, Mauthner, Wolfner and Oltványi were given an equally decisive impetus by Petrovics's concept. Imre Oltványi, perhaps the most important of them, was not only a promoter of the Gresham circle of post-Impressionist art, but also a critic and writer on art who repeatedly paid tribute to Petrovics. Oltványi related how collecting had become his passion under the direct influence of Petrovics, and how his own case served as model to other outstanding collectors, such as Lajos



Fruchter—who became a pioneer of collecting the latest in modern Hungarian art in the 1930s. A whole generation was taking up collecting again during Petrovics's directorship, after the shock of the First World War.

In resuscitating art collecting and patronage, and reviving the museum's circle of friends, Petrovics not only followed Bode's example, but fell back on one of the earliest Hungarian museum initiatives. Ágoston Kubinyi, director of the National Museum (1843–1869) had set up the first circle of supporters for the Museum's art gallery, the Nemzeti Képcsarnok. This association later merged into the larger and more conservative National Hungarian Fine Arts Association (OMKT). Prosperity helped the idea of friends of the Museum of Fine Arts back onto its feet in 1913, under the auspices of Count Gyula Andrásy and Radisics. Although the First World War slowed down this revival, Petrovics and Gyula Végh—Radisics' successor at the Museum of Applied Arts—grasped this initiative, and the Association of the Friends of Art Museums functioned again from the mid-1920s. When the twenty-year anniversary exhibition (1933) showed acquisitions by the Association for the Museum, Szinyei's *Lady in Purple*, and Ferenczy's *Sermon on the Mount* stood out as key works in modern Hungarian painting.

Following this example, individual patrons enriched the Museum of Fine Arts with donations that included the work of respected masters such as Adolf Fényes and József Koszta, painters of the inter-war generation, such as István Szónyi and Vilmos Aba-Novák, and foreign artists from Biedermeier painters, such as Waldmüller and the genre painter Pettenkofen, to early modern artists, such as Despiou and Denis. Donations to the Museum partly continued after Petrovics retired, including one work each by Utrillo and Vlaminck,

donated by Miksa Lénárd in 1938.

Even gallery owners joined these gestures. A well-known example was József Fränkel, who relates in his memoirs how events in his gallery regularly attracted the friendly circle of Petrovics, Tibor Gerevich—the head of the art history department at Pázmány Péter University, Budapest—in the company of such collectors as Oltványi and Fruchter. This certainly strengthened the position of the dealer; and the Fränkel Gallery, on its part, donated several works to the Museum. Fränkel explicitly states that the "moral stance and asceticism" of Petrovics made him a trustworthy figure to work with. Indeed, Petrovics—like Pál Majovszky, the ministerial official and private collector, who had proposed him for the post of director in 1914—came from Protestant stock and embodied what Max Weber calls a Calvinist work ethic.

**T**o expand acquisitions, Petrovics de-accessioned several works from Museum collections. European practice normally rejects such removal of inventoried museum items, but the lack of acquisition funds and the huge stock of second-rate holdings—established by earlier state acquisitions on considerations of national representation—legitimized this. While most works de-accessioned were exchanged for other items, some proceeds went into the museum funds to finance new acquisitions. Purchases were varied, ranging from works by the Art Nouveau painter Aladár Körösfői; ex-avant-garde and returned emigrant Róbert Berény; vagrant visionary István Farkas, to masterpieces by long-recognized painters, pieces such as *The Three Magi* by Ferenczy, and *My Father and Uncle Piacsek* by Rippl-Rónai.

Foreign acquisitions in modern painting were much poorer, but every item counted as a miracle against the back-



ground of the isolation of the country. Petrovics purchased precursors of modern art such as Menzel, Romako and Bastien-Lepage, and modern painters such as Puvis de Chavannes, Bonnard, Manet and Courbet.<sup>12</sup> Only few of these were acquired from collectors and exhibitions in Hungary, even though these two options might have partly offset the absence of foreign currency. Yet, exhibitions of modern European art were sporadic in inter-war Hungary; and collectors, if forced to sell, could rarely afford to lower their price for the Museum. While most occasions turned out to be missed opportunities, noted exceptions, such as the Bonnard and Bastien-Lepage paintings, were purchased at the Kohner Auction in the Ernst Museum in 1934. The Puvis de Chavannes canvas had been bought from Kohner earlier, and a Maurice Denis piece as a gift to complement Petrovics's buying at the auction. As most of the Kohner collection was bought by foreign bidders and left the country, these acquisitions were essential in preserving some of the country's cultural wealth in modern art.

Next to updating the permanent exhibition, and expanding acquisitions, Petrovics enlivened the neglected section of sculpture. Original plastic works had barely come to the Museum of Fine Arts, which was more of a picture gallery, complemented by plaster copies of Classical and Renaissance plastic works. These plaster casts had determined the construction of the building (1899–1906), yet the monumental ground floor vestibules—decorated in period styles—soon proved a burden. Modern sculpture, intimate and small in size, looked awkward in exhibition. Nonetheless, to promote sculpture (a medium held inferior to painting in Hungary) Petrovics bought new works by talented artists including Márk Vedres, Fülöp Beck, Imre Csikász and Ede Telcs,

and arranged a permanent exhibition of original sculpture in the Baroque Hall in 1926.

The exhibition opened with sculpture by such masters of Classicism as Miklós Izsó and István Ferenczy, some of whose works had been acquired by the National Museum in the 19th century, well before the Museum of Fine Arts was set up. The show included traditional works of the 'national school', thus by József Róna and János Fadrusz, and early Modernists such as Elza Kövesházi, Ödön Moïret and Vilmos Fémes-Beck, as well as foreign sculptors such as Minne, Maillol, Rodin and Meunier. Compared to the plaster casts that reduced the exhibition of sculpture and architecture to an educational trajectory and ignored aspects of modern plastic vision, this exhibition of original works was a victory, if meagre on an absolute scale.

**T**he greatest achievement of Petrovics was the initiation of the New Hungarian Gallery. Modern Hungarian art had accumulated a sufficiently segregated structure by the 1920s to need a multi-part exhibition.<sup>13</sup> Beyond updating the permanent modern exhibit with works becoming canonical, a separate 'semi-permanent contemporary exhibition' for works of the immediate past and present had to be set up. Petrovics lobbied successfully for access to the upper floor of the old Exhibition Hall, built in 1871, on the thoroughfare from the city centre to the City Park complex that included the Museum, too, and the New Hungarian Gallery opened there in 1928.

The part of the modern exhibit declared classical—including all foreign works—remained in the main building. This bifurcation reflected current international practice: the Neue Staatsgalerie in the building of the Sezession in Munich, the Palais du



Luxembourg in Paris and the Kronprinzen-Palais in Berlin exemplified separate galleries for modern art, housed and managed independently from their respective beaux-arts museums. As Vienna was likewise known to be preparing such a division, Budapest was proud to have taken over its long rival in completing the separate contemporary show first.<sup>14</sup> To draw the line between canonical and 'living' modern art, the Nagybánya artists colony (1896) lent itself as a natural watershed. The oeuvre of Simon Hollósy, founder of Nagybánya, stayed in the Museum of Fine Arts, Károly Ferenczy had 'Nagybánya-style' works in the Museum, and more recent canvases in the New Hungarian Gallery; works by younger artists landed directly in the latter.

The Gallery's exhibition started with established modern painting: Károly Ferenczy (17 works) and József Rippl-Rónai (11). This was complemented by several works each by painters such as István Csók, János Vaszary, Izsák Perlmutter, János Thorma, Adolf Fényes, László Mednyánszky, József Koszta and Gyula Rudnay.<sup>15</sup> Showing this variety was essential, but the politically delicate and art historically challenging part started with the presentation of the latest trends of modern art. The politically engaged avant-garde of Lajos Kassák's circle of the late 1910s could not be exhibited: conservative ideology rejected Activism, and the artists themselves were in exile. Also, the Museum of Fine Arts as a basically classic repository, while showing varying levels of receptivity towards modern art, rarely purchased avant-garde works that expressly defied its authority.<sup>16</sup> Still, six works by János Nagy Balogh—a poor-and-proud Activist, who donated work to the Museum of Fine Arts and whose paintings were bought by the Arts Directorate in 1919 as well—came to be shown in the Gallery. Three artists, Róbert

Berény, Károly Kernstok and Ödön Márffy represented the legacy of the milder, formalist avant-garde group of 'The Eight' (1909). Yet their works included canvases that renounced artistic experimentation, and central figures in the group, such as Lajos Tihanyi, in exile in Paris, were absent.<sup>17</sup>

Next to this compromised avant-garde section of the Gallery's exhibition, younger artists whose working life began after 1920 were included more widely. Modern art in this period was less radical than prior to 1919, and these artists were working towards a valuable oeuvre, the representation of which was the cardinal duty of the Gallery. This also offered growth potential, as buying from living masters was easiest. Vilmos Aba-Novák, Károly Patkó, József Egry, István Szőnyi, Jenő Paizs-Goebel and Imre Szobotka represented, with one or two paintings each, the inter-war artistic trends, reaching from the School of Rome to the Gresham circle. The Museum came to acquire later works by them regularly: *Riviera* by Aurél Bernáth, an iconic Gresham piece, was bought soon after its completion in 1927, and other works by Bernáth and Aba-Novák—including the latter's key *Csík-szereda Fair*, from the Fränkel Gallery—would come in yearly.

Other acquisitions included recent works by an earlier member of 'The Eight', Béla Czóbel, and *Self-Portrait* by István Nagy, a fine master of pastel. Next, the graphics section provided a terrain for showing works by artists on the periphery of the attention of official inter-war cultural policy, including Lajos Gulácsy and József Nemes Lampérth, whose works were acquired in 1919. There were also works by the near-Cubist János Kmetty, and the Art Nouveau artist Sándor Nagy. Later in the 1930s, even works by young artists lacking state recognition, such as Gyula Marosán and Imre Ámos, were bought; as well as



sculpture by József Csáky and Tibor Vilt. Exhibiting sculpture was an important part of the Gallery: in conjunction with the permanent exhibition of sculpture in the Museum, Fülöp Beck and Márk Vedres were represented in the Gallery by several works, and even *Prodigal Son* by politically leftist László Mészáros was bought.

Tivadar Csontváry Kosztká, an idiosyncratic painter of strong Symbolist force at the turn of the century, was finally represented when his *Taormina* was bought in 1934. Subsequently, the Ministry of Education bought his *Self-Portrait*—exhibited in the Museum in 1931—for the museum at the auction of the collection of Lajos Ernst in 1939. Although Csontváry's proper recognition in Hungary had to wait until the 1960s, it points to Petrovics's awareness of Csontváry's worth that he included a painting by him in *Magyar remekművek* (Hungarian Masterpieces, 1936), an exclusive book of reproductions and essays published by the journal *Pesti Napló*.

Petrovics's selection also included a younger artist, Gyula Derkovits, little understood in his lifetime but hailed after his death. Derkovits's Socialist stance made him a red rag in the eyes of the regime; at that he declined a Prix de Rome, the most substantial annual grant—a combination of political co-optation and aesthetic selection—by the Ministry of Education. Still, the Museum accepted a work as a gift from the artist in 1926, purchased a second one four years later, and soon bought two masterpieces. These were *Along the Railway*, bought in 1932 in the Tamás Gallery (the most progressive gallery of modern art in Budapest until 1944) and *Three Generations*, bought at the Ernst Museum retro-

spective of the painter in 1934. The latter, with an overbearing portrait of Marx in the background of the painting, was exhibited in the Gallery immediately, as evidence of the integrity of Petrovics and of the willingness of political powers to turn a blind eye on such diversions.

In a symbolic change, *Three Generations* was removed from the exhibition when the Gallery was closed, and the works were re-hung in the main building in 1938. Dénes Csáky, Petrovics's successor, allied with the right-wing in politics, fell short of curatorial requirements, and let most of Petrovics's achievements in the Museum disperse. While the closure of the Gallery was partly due to the very low number of visitors (5-6,000 yearly), Csáky's incompetence and ideological priorities were also responsible. Work at the Museum rapidly deteriorated after 1935.

Modern art became the foster child of the Museum of Fine Arts and of Hungarian museology in general. Petrovics's vision—born in the liberal tradition of the early twentieth century—turned out to be the last professional museum programme for modern art in Hungary for many years. His legacy suggests that museum administrators need not seek more than benign neutrality from the government for representing modern art. A clear museum vision can be implemented with civic support, curatorial consistency and personal commitment even in economically difficult times. But this presupposes defining why and how a museum wants to represent modern art and, specifically, how it differentiates the ever-changing 'contemporary art' from the canonized directions of modern art. ■



## NOTES

- 1 ■ For the historical background of conservatism and modernization in Hungary, see Ignác Romsics: *Hungary in the Twentieth Century*, Budapest, Corvina–Osiris, 1999.
- 2 ■ For a general overview of the history and the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts, see Klára Garas (ed.): *The Budapest Museum of Fine Arts*, Budapest, Corvina, 1985.
- 3 ■ On the tribulations of collecting modern European art in Hungary in the early twentieth century, see Judit Geskó's contribution to *Impressionism. Paintings Collected by European Museums*, catalogue, Atlanta, High Museum of Art, 1998, pp. 77–90.
- 4 ■ Gyöngyi Éri and Zsuzsa Jobbágyi: *A Golden Age. Art and Society in Hungary 1896–1914*, Budapest: Corvina, 1991, presents this intellectual and cultural blossoming of Hungary. Cf., also *Budapest 1869–1914. Modernité hongroise et peinture européenne*, catalogue, Dijon, Musée des Beaux-Arts, 1995.
- 5 ■ For a historical background, see Andrew C. János: *The Politics of Backwardness in Hungary, 1825–1945*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1982; and Iván T. Berend, *Decades of Crisis: Central and Eastern Europe before World War II*, Berkeley, CA., University of California Press, 1998.
- 6 ■ Petrovics's commitment to this élite lasted beyond his directorship, as he came to work for the successor of the Ernst Museum, the Almásy-Teleki Institute of Art, after his retirement in 1935.
- 7 ■ Elek Petrovics: "A Szépművészeti Múzeum jövője", in *Újkról és régiekről* (On the New and the Old). Budapest, Amicus, 1923, pp. 71–76. Although Petrovics published widely on art and museum policy alike, none of his works have been reprinted and/or translated. It is up to Hungarian art historians of the present to fill this gap.
- 8 ■ For a background to artists and art institutions, see Gábor András and Gábor Pataki, György Szűcs, András Zwickl: *The History of Hungarian Art in the Twentieth Century*, Budapest, Corvina, 1999.
- 9 ■ For an overview of the acquisitions of French works, see István Genthon: *From Romanticism to Postimpressionism: French Paintings in Hungary*, Budapest, Corvina, 1974.
- 10 ■ Ilona Sármany-Parsons: "Notes on Patronage of Modernism in the Fine Arts in Vienna and Budapest at the Turn of the Century", in *Central European University History Department Yearbook*, 1993, pp. 145–154.
- 11 ■ László Mravik (ed.): *'Sacco di Budapest' and Depredation of Hungary 1938–1949*, Budapest: Hungarian National Gallery, 1988, provides the most comprehensive source of art collecting in Hungary in the first half of the 20th century.
- 12 ■ Krisztina Passuth and Dénes Pataky: *Twentieth Century Art in the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest*, Budapest, Corvina, 1978.
- 13 ■ For a reconstruction of the parallel trends in modern Hungarian Art, see Lajos Németh: *Modern Art in Hungary*, Budapest, Corvina, 1969.
- 14 ■ On the relationship of Budapest and Vienna, see Péter Hanák: *The Garden and the Workshop. Essays on the Cultural History of Vienna and Budapest*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998.
- 15 ■ Alexius Petrovics (ed.): *Katalog der Neuen Ungarischen Galerie*, Budapest, Museum der bildenden Künste, 1930.
- 16 ■ For a background to this conflict, see Éva Forgács: "Avant-garde and Conservatism in the Budapest Artworld: 1910–1932", in Thomas Bender and Carl E. Schorske (eds.): *Budapest and New York: Studies in Metropolitan Transformation: 1870–1930*, New York, Russell Sage, 1995, pp. 309–331.
- 17 ■ For a regional contextualization of artists and artistic trends, see Steven Mansbach: *Modern Art in Eastern Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.



# “Hungarian Roots, English Traditions”

George Szirtes on Becoming an English Poet

**G**eorge Szirtes, born in Budapest in 1948, left Hungary with his family as a child in 1956 and settled in England. So far he has published 13 volumes of poetry, the most recent of which are *The Budapest File*, Bloodaxe/Corvina, 2000, a collection of his poems on Hungarian topics, and *An English Apocalypse*, Bloodaxe, 2001. He has received numerous prestigious British awards, including the Faber Prize and the Cholmondeley Award. He returned to Hungary for the first time in 1984 and has come back every year since then. He has translated many literary works into English, amongst others *The Tragedy of Man* by Imre Madách, selections from the poems of István Vas, Ottó Orbán, Sándor Csóri and Zsuzsa Rakovszky, and novels by Dezső Kosztolányi, Gyula Krúdy and László Krasznahorkai. The British Council chose one of his poems for an international poetry translation competition which attracted 118 entries from Hungarians. The selected Hungarian translators were invited to attend a seminar by Lake Balaton.

\*

*A.G.: You lived in Hungary until you were eight years old, then, with your family, you found a new home in England. What was it like growing up in England as a Hungarian child?*

*G.Sz.: I went to an ordinary English primary school and was immediately accepted. I made friends with the local English boys, and I suppose all I wanted as a young child was to fit in with them, be like them—an English schoolboy. We never lived in any Hungarian community, in England such a thing doesn't really exist. My parents wanted to start a new life, and my younger brother and I, to some extent, personified that new life. We spoke English at home, and so I largely forgot what Hungarian I had known. At secondary school I was interested in natural sciences, but I went on to study at art school; I trained to become a painter, though even then I was doing an awful lot of writing. My poems at that time had nothing whatever to do with Hungary, nor indeed did any of my first three published volumes.*

Text of an interview originally published in the Budapest weekly *Élet és Irodalom*, 14 September, 2001.



*Didn't your parents have any relatives, or maybe friends, with whom they stayed in contact?*

My parents had friends there, but virtually all our family was wiped out during the war. In fact, there were only two who remained in Hungary afterwards. On that score, I might just as well have visited Buenos Aires, Sydney or Cluj-Kolozsvár, though I only got to know about the relative in Kolozsvár much later on. As a result, Hungary had no part in those first three volumes. In 1983, however, it suddenly became extremely important to me. It dawned on me that there were undiscovered areas of my life, and that I had no idea how I could broach them, nor indeed what it was that I needed to discover. During a holiday in Scotland I started reading about Hungary. By the following year I had already made my way here with a bursary, and I have been back virtually every year since. My first visit, though it only lasted three weeks, was decisive: for the first time in ages everyone around me was speaking Hungarian—it was as if I were hallucinating. And I recognized streets, the sounds and smells of the city, everything. Everything I wrote about for many years was changed.

*Your mother came back from a concentration camp; most of her family had been killed. Didn't you have any prejudices, antipathies, fears?*

No, I had no idea what to expect, what to count on. My mother had already died by then, in 1975. I didn't have a coherent picture of the country, no feel for the political and social developments.

*And the past didn't disturb you?*

By that token I could just as easily have felt the same about almost any country in Europe. But it is a lot more complex than that: I only learned that my mother was Jewish after her death. She had told us quite a different story.

*So at that point you had no idea even about her own life?*

I knew that she had been deported to a concentration camp, but others were also deported. And she never wanted to speak about it; she didn't want us to know. Consequently, we didn't keep up any Jewish traditions; in fact, we were brought up in a completely non-Jewish manner. In 1970, when I was 21, I had myself baptised by full immersion, as a Baptist—not for the sake of appearances, I hasten to add, but out of genuine conviction. Last year I was confronted with a serious dilemma. A publisher approached me with a request to allow my poems to be included in an anthology of British Jewish twentieth-century verse. I agonized over it for quite a long time as it would mean acting against my mother's wishes. But what was I to do when it is very clear on reading my poetry that at least some of those who are very close to me are Jewish, and I have no wish to deny that. I am aware, of course, that what I think is one thing, and what others regard me as being is another. So I had neither fears nor antipathies



when I first visited Hungary, and as a matter of fact I couldn't have had a better reception. A small delegation from the PEN Club was there to meet me. A fair number of the people I got to know then are still friends to this day. After 1984 I wrote a surprisingly large amount of poems relating to Hungary.

*You have now published those poems as a separate volume, even though they appeared in previous collections.*

The main reason is entirely practical: I am with a new publisher, Bloodaxe, and they were keen to put out my earlier work as well. The idea for the volume came from Bloodaxe, who felt this was the best way of presenting my work as a whole. I was initially very doubtful about it myself, though I have since been won over. Since 1984 I have often had the odd experience of being introduced as a Hungarian poet at poetry readings in England, even though I have never written a line in Hungarian. This meant that I was not regarded as a fully English poet in any case. And then I was rather averse to making a selection of my verse on thematic grounds, but since the notion had already been put forward, I thought, well let's see if it can be made to work, and I gave in. I ruminated a lot over it; that is why there is a preface, which is very unusual with a volume of poems. The next volume, *The English Apocalypse*, which appeared this autumn, contains all my poems on English subjects. As far as I was concerned originally, though, this seemed a little artificial because I didn't write in that sort of programmatic manner. Now I think, it has, in many ways, clarified things. Eventually there will be a third volume, which will be the hardest of the three to classify as it will include those poems which did not fit into the first two. In reality, of course, there are some poems which might just as easily have fitted into either the Hungarian or the English-related volume because they deal with what it is like being a Hungarian in Britain. That in itself is an uncommon condition; it makes you a strange being, and sometimes it is hard to accept being regarded by English readers as an ambiguous phenomenon of that sort. I naturally write in English, and my poems are mostly informed by the English poetic tradition—what other tradition could inform it so directly? Of course the position is by no means as clear-cut as either / or. Nor as unusual.

*You grew up on English literature, under the influence of English poets. So is the Hungarian connection only evident in the subject-matter?*

If you do a lot of translating, and I only translate from Hungarian, then you absorb a lot in the process, you learn all sorts of things. Several Hungarian poets have had a strong influence on me, both technically and creatively. When I translated the sonnets of Ottó Orbán, for instance, I found the near-Classical quantities of his metre fascinating. Classical metres are not much used in English poetry, so I was keen to try out whether I could make them work. I wrote a whole cycle of my own poems in this fashion, and I now use them as a matter of



course. They have helped me a lot. The register is also important, since one of the major differences between two poets is that they employ different voices. Certain kinds of voice are more characteristic of one culture rather than another. In the process of self-discovery one tries various tones. In all probability, every poem that I have translated has left some sort of imprint on me.

*Do you think English readers sense that difference in your poems, the fact that a non-English tradition also has a profound impact on your work?*

As far as the style and vocabulary goes, they occasionally come across something unusual or outlandish. When criticizing my poems, though, they have had more problems with the language being too polished, too English, rather than too foreign. A lot of people positively enjoy it if a poem's voice departs from the standard literary range, but I have no control over that; I can't play the foreigner. In 1993 there appeared the highly influential Bloodaxe *New Poetry* anthology which, as part of its programme, divided up the mainstream of English poetry into various contemporary "regional" literatures each with its own specific racy idiom. As a result I was left in a difficult position as I don't belong to any English region. I speak a neutral, "standard" English. Just as I can't play the foreigner, I can't adopt the role of a regional writer either.

*But then you have individual experiences; you can write about a history that no other British poet can lay claim to.*

There are both gains and losses. You gain a certain curiosity value, but you lose detailed attention, as indeed happened in certain quarters with *The Budapest File*. The book received considerable and favourable publicity, but the accent in the more prominent papers was less on the poetry than on the singularity of the phenomenon of the author. It was rather like praising a dog for being able to go about on its hind legs.

*Trinity College in Dublin last year invited you, a Hungarian English poet of Jewish descent, as writer-in-residence, to give a series of lectures about nationalism. How did that come about?*

They had inaugurated a new post which entailed inviting a foreign writer every year, and I was the first one they chose. On my arrival I still didn't know exactly what I was supposed to be doing; indeed, since I was the first, I don't think the university knew either. In the end, I ran a series of seminars on the subject of literary translation for post-graduates involved in writing poetry or fiction and gave also some poetry readings. I was, at the same time, asked to give two public lectures about the association of literature with nationalism. The question of nationalism is, of course, a highly vexed one in Ireland, so I was well aware that my coming from England had various profound implications. I suspected that they had invited me precisely because I was both Hungarian and English (such



invitations are one of the interesting aspects of complex identity). I tried to speak about the uncertainty and fear that attach to my own understanding of nationalism. I said something about literary identity, that is to say, about the difference between what you hold yourself to be, and what others hold you to be. I spoke, albeit tangentially, about nationalism in Ireland, which is a very powerful force drawing on a persuasive version of historical memory. Hatred of England is deeply imbedded in it. I myself had grown up in England, and had no grounds for complaint on that score. I used the situation of Hungary as a point of reference, as indeed they would have expected me to. I argued that the intensity of Irish nationalism was amplified because Ireland has had just one historical enemy: England. Ireland is a small island next to a bigger island which separates it from Europe. Compiling a roster of Hungary's historical enemies yields a much longer list. The hostility is therefore more widely directed. The real question was why historical antagonisms should play such an important part in our contemporary life at all? To displaced people such as myself, I suggested, such antagonisms always presented serious problems. Furthermore, ever more people were displaced. Displacement was in fact the basic condition even of those who imagined otherwise. That was the essence of my lectures. They were received with some enthusiasm, so I imagine there may be sufficient desire to leave the old vexed issues aside, and so to improve matters.

*You are not only a poet but also a literary translator. Is there a readership for Hungarian poetry in England?*

I suspect they would all fit into a single large hall. For the English to read a foreign poet there has to be a "story" of some kind over and above the poems themselves.

*Hungarian culture falls outside the purview of the English; there are few historical or cultural links between the two countries.*

There are links, but not important ones. One interesting consequence of *The Budapest File* that was not the result of any conscious premeditation is that Budapest has now found its way onto the map of English poetry. In earlier volumes too I had included selections from my translations of Ágnes Nemes Nagy and Ottó Orbán, along with renderings of Attila József and Miklós Radnóti. I felt that there were two main ways in which I could be of service to Hungarian experience: by establishing Hungarian places and events in my own English writing, and by translating Hungarian authors. In lucky moments it seemed as if I had been given the key to a side door of English literature and could therefore let in those I admired.

*One of your first translations was Madách's verse-play, The Tragedy of Man. Did you intend that as a symbolic gesture, or has the play actually been staged since in England?*



No, at least *my* translation has not been performed. *The Tragedy* is a very important work: to my knowledge, as we speak there are at least five Hungarians living abroad who are working on translations of it. When I set to work on it, to be honest, I was not really aware of its significance. Sadly, though, it was very hard to find a British publisher for it. They were not enthusiastic about publishing a nineteenth-century piece, and one written in verse at that. It would be hard enough selling it even if it had originally been written in English, they argued, let alone in Hungarian! Still, it was eventually published and was fairly well received by the critics. Mine was a literary translation, not intended primarily for performance: if there were a question of performing it I would probably have to redo the whole thing from the very beginning with a different attitude.

*Do you reckon there is any chance they would perform it in England?*

Yes. In an appropriate translation. All sorts of things appear on the English stage. There would have to be an element of luck in it, but much more of the play would come across than people imagine. I am quite certain that belief, hard work, enthusiasm and an adequate measure of promotion can go a long way, but people have first to be persuaded to give it their attention, and, of course, their financial support too. Very few Hungarian plays do make it to England, of course. Hungarian culture is represented much more by music, film, photography and science. For obvious linguistic reasons Hungarian literature is an unknown quantity, and there are few of us who are capable of translating it to English at a level that can be published—maybe six or seven in the whole world.

*Right now you are working on a novel. Can you give us some clue what it will be about?*

The model for the main protagonist was a real person, a Hungarian wrestler who emigrated to England at the same time as we did and quite quickly made a name for himself there. He was often on the TV, a genuinely likeable figure and a real favourite with the public. He was twenty years older than me, and I only met him on one occasion. Indeed, I only once saw him live in the ring, at the very start of his career.

*What was his name?*

Tibor Szakács. He'd won a silver medal at the world championships and in England he turned to professional wrestling, which is a very different sport. He led a remarkably interesting life, but in the book there are two other major perspectives beside the biographical. The first concerns social history. The action takes place during the period when I myself was growing up in England, the England where I still live, but the novel seeks a standpoint different from my own (of course it includes my own as well). The second concerns psychological experience and its relationship to dream. Professional wrestling is virtually a



form of circus in which the wrestlers adopt a persona, put on symbolic masks and costumes, and develop vivid carnivalesque roles. Lately I have been attending a lot of pro-wrestling bouts, chatting with wrestlers and making friends with some of them. What the novel means for me, more than anything else, is that I can become someone different, and adopt an identity rather as wrestlers themselves do. After all sport hasn't played any part in my life as a writer. Mine has become a life of the mind and heart. It's as if I had discovered another self that I could only exist in in dreams. The parallels with my own life are magnified. The most fascinating aspect of Szakács's career is that he was able to remain an outsider in a world of increasingly grotesque characters: he never put on any disguise and always stepped into the ring in plain wrestling strip. He was always himself when he fought; he had a remarkably developed technique, and the public admired him. His career followed the kind of highly coloured tragic arc that can serve as myth. Wrestling is theatre, and as time went on he found that he was increasingly asked to play the loser's role. In 1978, he lost the sight of one eye during a bout with another well-known wrestler—one of the major masked figures of the time—and on his return to the ring he failed to achieve the same success. He died not long after that. ❁

*András Gerevich*

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- Vilmos Csaplár: *Igazságos Kádár János* (János Kádár the Just). Budapest, Magyar Könyvklub, 2001, 223 pp.
- László Márton: *Kényszerű szabadulás (Testvériség)* (Forced Liberation [Brotherhood]). Pécs, Jelenkor, 2001, 197 pp.

Almost without anyone noticing, Ádám Bodor at 65 has become one of the most important figures in contemporary Hungarian literature, with a name that is also known further afield. He doesn't belong to any generational, political or stylistic grouping; his books apart, he is hardly ever in the public eye, and as far as the books themselves go, he publishes infrequently and sparsely at that: all slim volumes. He is self-confessedly lazy by nature; but his short novels are extremely terse and compressed, poetically condensed, charged. The author's persona and autobiography are manifest only at multiple removes and are thus virtually unrecognizable. Zsófia Balla, a fellow writer from Transylvania who, like Bodor, has made a new home in Hungary, seems to have felt like many of his readers in wishing to know more about this curious author.

This is the genesis of the *A börtön szaga* (The Stench of Prison), in which Ádám Bodor testifies directly, without transpositions or stylizing fictions, about himself, his views and his life. The book is subtitled "Responses to Questions by Zsófia Balla", and those questions are printed for form's

sake, placed in the relaxed atmosphere of the conversation, structuring as well as channelling it in the meantime, but remaining in the background. So this is not at all an interview in the conventional sense. Once the skilfully teed-up framework has loosened his tongue, Bodor speaks freely; or to be more precise, since he was tape-recorded, it looks very much as if what appears here was written by him on the basis of the recording. For the text of *The Stench of Prison* is a written one, as the title page indeed suggests by presenting the book's contents as one of Bodor's works. This has produced a distinctive kind of autobiographical confession: the text is addressed throughout to a conversational partner, and to that extent is composed of answers to questions; at the same time there are passages that, by the way they are formulated, might equally be read as short stories or essays. Thanks to Zsófia Balla, then, we are the richer for a work by Bodor that, without her, most likely would not have come into existence. The real merit of *The Stench of Prison*, nevertheless, is that it is an enthralling synopsis of a life story, upliftingly fine even in its grimness,

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Miklós Györffy

reviews new fiction for this journal.



and an intellectual and moral stance won at the cost of many tribulations.

Bodor was born into a middle-class Calvinist family in Kolozsvár (Cluj). His father, a true patrician of the old school, was the manager of the biggest Transylvanian bank who, despite being in Hungary at the end of the Second World War and being offered a post as permanent under-secretary, chose to return to Transylvania. There the Romanian Communists imprisoned first him then, in 1952, the sixteen-year-old Ádám, a secondary school boy, who, along with fellow pupils, had been turning out and distributing leaflets calling for the overthrow of the régime. The fact that he was Hungarian only further aggravated the offence. Young Bodor served a term of two years, first in Kolozsvár, later in the notorious prison at Szamosujvár (Gherla). *The Stench of Prison* tells, first and foremost, about the experiences of the still growing boy ("I grew another four inches whilst in prison") as he matured into manhood in direct proximity to unimaginable horrors. By then, the bloody era of ruthlessly violent political "re-education" was drawing to a close ("To this day, the general public knows nothing about what happened in Romanian prisons between nineteen forty-nine and 'fifty-two"); yet he was still on the receiving end of humiliations and acts of cruelty. The only reason why he was freed before the end of his sentence was because the father of one of his fellow-conspirators was in the régime's good books and interceded with Gheorghiu-Dej, by then Head of State as well as First Secretary of the Communist party, on the boys' behalf.

After release, Bodor worked as a lathe operator in a machine tool factory. He later applied to study at the Calvinist theological college, the only higher education institution that would take him, and was thus able to continue an education devoid

of Marxist propaganda. Though having no intention of becoming a minister, he had no literary ambitions at that time. He became an archivist in the diocesan record office at Kolozsvár but clashed with his bishop and resigned. He was nearly thirty when his first short story appeared.

For the seventeen years afterwards, as one of his colleagues put it, he lived as a sort of private writer in Kolozsvár. A freelancer with no affiliations, a solitary person even in the tight, isolated community of Transylvania's Hungarian-language literary life, publishing little, constantly under surveillance by the Securitate, the censor's department only just tolerating his grotesque tales set in a fictive, timeless domain, because it did not know what to make of them. He was so impecunious that he only just managed to keep body and soul together by retiring regularly for months to lead a hermit's life in the remoteness of the Carpathians, in a simple, godforsaken hut where he effectively lived off the land. He was also sustained by the experience of the perfection of a Nature untouched by humans, above all compared to the fraudulent, execrable East European dictatorship that, bit by bit, was erasing all traces of Transylvania's once rich multiethnic culture.

With the political climate becoming ever more unendurable, and after official formalities that dragged out over five years, Ádám Bodor moved to Hungary in 1982. Although in more recent years he has again been feeling homesick for his native land, the localities of his youth, and especially the mountains and clouds of the country of the Székely, he is also quite clear in his mind that he would no longer be able to live there: "Our once-familiar middle-class milieu has been degraded, but nothing equivalent has arisen in its place that we accept with any sympathy and can respect." The process from which he fled has continued ever since:



Even from a bird's eye view it is unpleasant to witness the proprietors of this country-sized region seemingly incapable of knowing what to do with its wealth and diversity, any more than its inhabitants with their freedom. The concept of a native land is slowly starting to become distorted in those who have stayed behind—to the extent that one fears they are going to move away from there permanently with ever-lighter hearts. Now that the glorious Saxon churches have grown empty, slowly those of the Magyars are also growing empty, and not a single Romanian patriot will have cause for rejoicing at the still that will ensue.[...] Rather, I have the feeling that when they will ceremoniously declare that the very last stranger is now safely beyond the borders, there will be none of the promised revels, but a forlorn stillness of dismay will settle amongst the empty churches and upon those who are left behind.

Bodor does not feel entirely comfortable even in Hungary. He believes that those who, like him, have been schooled in the harsher, more rigorous climes of East Europe and gained more first-hand experience of life as members of an ethnic minority, are better positioned than people in the home-country to discern that the curses of East-Europeanness are still being visited even on that land as well—and he would include here the more recent manifestations of affronted national arrogance. In his view, the concept of democracy has yet to be fully clarified even in Hungary, and he is deeply ashamed on that score, irrespective of whether this really is part and parcel of the region's nature or not. Regarding the nature of the place, he asserts with bitter, resigned sarcasm:

To be quite frank, there is something about the flatter part of this Carpathian Basin that doesn't quite add up. Great as the warmth that it is capable of radiating from the idyllic world of its isolated farmsteads, so too is the bleakness and indifference carried by the biting winds that brew up, from time to

time, over those plains. Petőfi loved this part of the world, and so have many more besides him, but they are certainly not a majority. Yet almost every fortnight there pops up some crackpot who likens our country's potential and prospects to those of Switzerland. A curious posture, no doubt about it. As far as our endowments and talents go, Switzerland is the very last place that would come to my mind in connection with my little homeland, smack-dab in the middle of apathetic plains without prospect, blasted by flood and drought in turn, and a fathomless up-yours attitude. What I increasingly find myself wondering is how it was possible to stick it out here for a thousand years... Unfortunately, most of the more pleasant spots were already occupied a thousand years ago, whilst we Hungarians were unable to hang onto the prettier part of our territories. Now it would be nice if at least what is left were to stay—of course, with an internal order that would induce us to learn to cherish this place even in a clear awareness of the gap between us and Switzerland.

Works by Bodor, or reviews of them, have appeared in German, English, French, Norwegian, Danish, Italian, Bulgarian, Serb, Czech, Croat and Romanian.

**V**ilmos Csaplár's latest prose volume, *Igazságos Kádár János* (Kádár the Just), is comprised of fairy-tale stories about Hungary's former leader and his comrades—as if the man and his legendary rule over the country were already lost in the mists of folk tale and the narrator were bringing together a bunch of ancient legends. Both the genre and the narrative register are familiar to the Hungarian reader: they come from the cycle of fables about King Matthias that form a distinct chapter in the country's folk-tale tradition. The very title alludes to the great Renaissance king's heroic status, for it was on him that the sobriquet "the Just" was bestowed. The most recent collection of old Hungarian legends details a total of seventy-five such



Matthias stories. One group of these, and also the best-known, concerns how the king goes around in disguise amongst the people, becoming embroiled in various sticky situations which he then puts to rights, sometimes disclosing his identity, at other times maintaining his anonymity.

Csaplár's Kádár stories play off these fables, though avoiding any effort at labouring the parallels or archaizing, whilst invoking, both in substance and idiom, the tawdry, stale petty-bourgeois tone and drearily rapid banalities that marked the Kádár era. Kádár features in them as a wily, "sharp" folk hero, a strict but just "first secretary", a simple yet honest worker for "world revolution", but nicely judged injections of irony and, for that matter, the knock-about incongruity of the stylization set the anecdotes in a rather different perspective. From this viewpoint, the "sharpness" comes over as hidebound routine, the simplicity as churlish pettiness, and Kádár's "reign" as a series of absurd fatuities.

The figure of Kádár and a clutch of recurrent motifs successfully bind together the dozen of stories that make up the volume. One such motif is the purple bloom that Kádár discovers one day in the garden of his villa. This, it soon turns out, when Kádár outwits his bodyguards to check it out in person, is a hitherto unknown, unnamed species. Unfamiliar even to the country's most eminent botanist, still, through coverage in the media it is proved to flourish even in the most out-of-the-way spots, whilst no trace of it can be found in the great Soviet Union or the brotherly countries of the Socialist camp. In the end, Kádár takes the matter to the Central Committee, but they not only fail to solve the riddle, they inflate it into a national political issue, a veritable scandal, that keeps everyone feverishly occupied. The moral of Csaplár's grotesque political

tale is that in Kádár's Hungary it is just as likely that the violet went unrecognized (possibly due to its "shrinking" nature) as that ignoring the evidence of what was before people's eyes could give rise to a series of ersatz actions that roped in the entire country.

Another thread is the temptation of "Comrade Kovács-style cravings". One fine morning, it occurs to László Kovács, a first secretary in the county party administration, that he and his comrades are not really enjoying life; "They had the hold on power..., and yet they were more laden with cares, he and his comrades, than what was left of the enemy... For heaven's sake! When would it end!" Were not they of all people, the very ones who were leading the world revolution, the best, better even than primeval society, to victory, the ones who wanted only the best for the working people, entitled to a bit of pleasure in their lives? This "Comrade Kovács-style craving" steadily ruffles the atmosphere, like a spring breeze, and hard as the all-seeing eye of Comrade Kádár's ascetic wife may try to track it, the seasoned heroes are unable to resist the lures of pleasure. Several of Csaplár's tales concern the gentrified passions—hunting and revelries—of well-known, explicitly identified party notables (cultural tsar György Aczél, defence minister Lajos Czinege and various other Central Committee secretaries, including Béla Biszku, Zoltán Komócsin, Lajos Fehér, and so on) with anecdotal details. Thus, the eternally scheming Comrade Biszku usually exists on nothing more than yoghurt and soured milk, or at most a hot dog on a paper tray when out shooting, whereas Czinege has a whole cold-room at home ("the biggest freezer of all in the Politburo") stuffed with game that he slaughters with bursts of machine-gun fire; Comrade Aczél, though, would always bag a brace of pheasant—a brace of stuffed



birds that he brought with him from home.

Kádár too is fond of shooting, and one Sunday, after rowing at lunch with his wife, who makes soup and fried chicken for him from the poultry that peck around in their villa garden, has his chauffeur drive him to the city of Eger in order to visit his former sweetheart, Irén Wimmer, who now packs cigarettes in the Eger Tobacco Works. As he patiently awaits the tardy world revolution and plays adroit games with the frailties of his comrades, Kádár resists all Comrade Kovács-style cravings. When on one occasion, in the cellars of the Party's vineyard, a drunken Comrade Fehér licks off the chocolate sauce that has been poured over the bare bosom of an attractive but deaf-mute casual worker, it is Kádár who scrambles out from beneath the table to catch him in the act. For punishment, he busts Fehér down to Second Secretary and exiles him as ambassador to Mongolia: "The desert and the bleating of the goats will do your nerves a power of good, Comrade Fehér."

At the zenith of his era, Kádár floats the idea that posterity might possibly name the purple flower after them, "Of course, only if we have merited it." Kádária, I suppose you mean, Biszku growls under his breath. But by the time János Kádár had grown old, to be deposed and die, not a single one of the purple flowers was left either: there is nothing to name after him: "Now, as ever, the prescient did well out of it—those who had pressed a fine specimen in time. To this very day they can inspect it under a pane of glass." Csaplár's stories are relics of the Kádár era that have been preserved under glass. As to what is true and what tittle-tattle, who, these days, is in a position to say?

In his new book, *Kényszerű szabadulás* (Forced Liberation), László Márton continues the project he embarked on with *Jacob Wunschwitz igaz története* (The True Story of Jacob Wunschwitz; 1997), that of

writing a historical novel in a way that ironically subverts the established practices of the genre, relativizing and commenting on the conventional function of the narrator at every turn. The novel is thus playfully made up of several mutually contradictory strata. For a start, it has a "true story", which is to say a strand of the plot based on authenticated historical facts, accounts of first-hand witnesses and other source documents. Then there is a "made-up" story; to be more precise, the authentic chronicle becomes intermingled with elements of imaginary, mythical events which elicit certain narrative clichés—in this case stock motifs from romances and picaresque novels of the late Renaissance and Baroque eras, such as the many variations on the theme of siblings who are kidnapped or fall into captivity and, in the course of the adventurous ups and downs of their fortunes, become separated for a prolonged period then, having made their way through many lands and courts, are eventually rejoined without being aware of their kinship (hence the "brotherhood" of the parenthesized subtitle of Márton's work) and fall in love with one another. A third stratum contains the unremittingly argumentative and arbitrary interjections, commentaries and digressions of a narrator who claims omniscience. On the one hand, this expands a story which in itself unfolds in a convoluted, fortuitous manner towards a horizon of possible further, unwritten stories; on the other, it projects the late twentieth-century perspective of the narrator into the text. The aim of this flaunting of omniscience, of course, is to totally unsettle the reader as to what, in the end, did or did not happen: in other words, where the boundary between recorded and unrecorded histories lies.

The opening chapter, "New Guest at the Raven", relates that in early September 1697 Baron Sándor Károlyi, Lord Lieute-



nant of Szatmár County, arrives in Vienna at the invitation of Cardinal Kollonich, the Hungarian chancellor, and puts up at the Raven Inn. The arrogant Kollonich is not prepared to give him audience for the time being, so Károlyi, who, like other Hungarian aristocrats of the time, is compelled to juggle between fidelity to the Austrian emperor and the Ottoman-backed insurrection of Prince Ferenc II Rákóczi, has cause to fear that his position is not looking too good. As to the real reasons why Károlyi might be fearful of the powerful chancellor, who he was, and what his role was in history, these things are of little concern to Márton's narrator. This in itself is significant, of course, bearing in mind that the average Hungarian reader is likely to be aware that this particular Károlyi is, first, the "traitorous" Károlyi who was later (in 1711) to sign the ignominious Treaty of Szatmár with the Habsburgs, which put paid to Rákóczi's war of liberation, and second, an ancestor of the aristocratic family that was to play a significant part in Hungary's subsequent history (e.g. the Count Mihály Károlyi, who became the first prime minister and later president of newly independent Hungary at the very end of the First World War).

What interests Márton's narrator far more is that Sándor Károlyi had an older brother, who, as far as everyone knows, died in action fighting the Turks in 1686. By the end of this increasingly self-parodying romanticized story it turns out that this brother is allegedly still alive, having spent the past fourteen years as a Turkish prisoner in the Levant, at Smyrna, finally being released by an adventurer who is looking to gain a rich reward for his services from the younger brother, the Lord Lieutenant. Kollonich has summoned Sándor to Vienna in order to hand István over to him—though not before recovering the monies that he had advanced to cover the

adventurer's expenses. Márton refrains from bringing the now released figure of István Károlyi directly into play, and although Sándor—having been a boy when he last saw his brother, and infrequently at that, has no way of knowing whether it really is him—suspects he is the victim of a swindle, he is made to understand, whilst in the Cardinal's residence, that "you will not be leaving here, that's for sure, until you embrace your brother, or the one whom reliable people have declared to be him."

Márton's narrator relates this tale, which is to be understood as, in truth, a rather skimpy and increasingly parodic literary citation, with such unbridled discursiveness and pedantic volubility that there are times when one loses the thread or becomes engrossed in subsidiary plots whose "occurrence" the narrator subsequently throws in doubt or retracts. One of the chapters bears the title "An Unwritten Chapter", which we are supposed to interpret as the narrator's musing speculations on how a nineteenth-century omniscient novelist would have eked out his "ignorance" (i.e. the lack of source documents: in the present case, regarding the history of István Károlyi's military exploits and death in action) within the conventions of the historical novel. Meanwhile, the constant assertion of his present-day perspective and the cumulative anachronisms serve to distance the narrator from this practice, so he ends up doing the selfsame thing in the process, and is aware that this is what he is doing, indeed inscribing that awareness too into the text. *Forced Liberation* illustrates, with spellbinding wit and doses of slightly trying sophistry, that wherever we try to grasp the world, it is chock-full of stories, each an unwritten novel, the very act of writing which summons up a string of yet more unwritten as well as all sorts of writable novels. ■



Tibor Hajdu

## Kádár's Shadow

Tibor Huszár: *Kádár János politikai életrajza. 1. kötet 1912-1956*. (The Political Biography of János Kádár. Vol. 1. 1912-1956) Budapest, Szabad Tér Kiadó—Kossuth Kiadó, 2001, 406 pp. • László Varga (ed.) *Kádár János bírái előtt. Egyszer fent, egyszer lent 1949-1956*. (János Kádár Before His Judges. Ups and Downs. 1949-1956) Budapest, Osiris—Budapest Főváros Levéltára (Osiris—The Municipal Archives of Budapest), 2001, 728 pp.

Foreigners may be surprised by the interest Hungarians take in the personality of those who ran their country in the century that has just passed. There has always been an intense interest in history here, and even though the EU will open a new road leading far afield from bygone days, common discourse still enjoys dealing with them. The average reader is not interested in economic theories or ideologies, but in events of the recent past, and willingly equates defunct regimes with their leaders. The last Hungarian king (Charles IV—Charles I as Emperor of Austria) died 80 years ago, yet the person with the greatest authority in the country, until 1989, held more power than any constitutional monarch in the 20th century. The Regent Miklós Horthy did so in law too, invested as he was with some of the rights of a reigning king; the Communist first secretaries, Mátyás Rákosi and János Kádár, wielded authority without legal authorization. Given this interest in history, it is not surprising that the latest National Book Festival this spring saw two new Horthy biographies, along with the final

volume of a trilogy on Rákosi, and four books dealing with the controversial figure of János Kádár.

Of these last, only two will be discussed here. (The others are one by an economist, Sándor Kopátsy, which is more a volume of personal reflections, a portrait of the age, than a biography, and a substantial collection of studies [edited by Árpád Rácz], developed from a successful special issue of the journal *Rubicon*, on Kádár, deserves a special review but not by me who was one of the contributors.) The two works dealt with here are alike in that both deal with Kádár's personality and his path to power, and both stop at the point, 1956, when Kádár, then 44, arrived at the peak.

Tibor Huszár, who is a sociologist, was the first to write a detailed and scholarly biography of Kádár; this volume is the first of two, the second will deal with Kádár in power. I think he is ideally placed to author such a work (already a bestseller): after 1945 he was a leading figure among the young Communists in Budapest, until he was forced out of politics in 1956; the right author, not only because he was per-

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Tibor Hajdu's

books include *A magyarországi Tanácsköztársaság (The Hungarian Soviet Republic, 1969)* and *a biography of Count Mihály Károlyi*.



sonally acquainted with Kádár and the age, but also as his position at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences allowed him to maintain an objective distance from the events of everyday politics and to assume the position of a critic with empathy for his subject. His first critics charge Huszár with excessive leniency in his treatment of Kádár, yet I feel it is difficult to maintain one's objectivity when the subject himself was in power for the greater part of one's life. In such circumstances one can only write a biography that either debunks or understands. Huszár wrote the latter.

For Hungarian readers, the greatest amount of new information is to be found in the chapter dealing with Kádár's boyhood. This is only fair since a knowledge of the boy is essential for an understanding of the man. The history of Kádár's early years has been surrounded with almost complete darkness. Little was known in the West and less in Hungary. Huszár's meticulous research added many details. Kádár was *illegitimate* from the moment he was born: his father, a soldier serving in Fiume (now Rijeka, Croatia), the Austro-Hungarian Empire's large naval base, denied paternity nor did he contribute to the support of Kádár's mother, a housemaid. She brought him up in the greatest poverty, under her own name (Csermanek). In 1945, following the contemporary fashion, he changed his foreign-sounding name and opted for an anagrammatic solution, taking the first and last letter of his new surname from his father's. After his birth, his mother moved to Budapest, where she worked as a housemaid, washerwoman, concierge and papergirl; her son spent his first six years with foster parents in the country before they were reunited.

Borbála Csermanek was a simple, uneducated woman, but she wanted her son to do better: she managed to send him to school until he was 14, afterwards making

him acquire what was then a prestigious trade, that of typewriter mechanic. But this was to be the second decisive tragedy in his life. Though he got as far as his apprenticeship, no one would employ him. Huszár claims this was because he was rumoured to be a Communist; I think it was simply because trade skills were not enough: offices wanted to have their typewriters serviced by well-mannered neat young men. Kádár not only did not possess decent clothes, he refused to be helped: when his apprentice master offered him a used shirt so that he stood a better chance of employment, he angrily refused. Despite having a trade, until the age of 30 he grubbed along on badly-paid occasional jobs; he never left his mother's social level, to the pull of which he reacted not with adaptive ambition, but with dogged adherence to his class and a wounded self-consciousness. It is hardly surprising that, at the age of 19, during the Depression, he joined the then very active Young Communist Workers' Association; even less surprisingly, he was soon grabbed by the no less avid police. He got away with the customary beating and humiliation, and three months in prison. In 1933, however, he was arrested again and this time was sentenced to two years' imprisonment.

He served the two years (in instalments) but his comrades found fault with his behaviour under police interrogation: more out of inexperience than panic, he gave evidence against two of his fellows. In court he retracted his testimony, claiming that he had been tortured, a claim that was accepted neither by the court nor the Young Communist Workers' Association, who expelled him. There is nothing peculiar about this story up to this point, and we can hardly find it odd that experienced policemen should trick a young man of 21. But this event, discussed by Huszár with subtle psychology, was determinative in



the life of Kádár. Other people in such cases could either conceal the lapse in their party record, or quit politics altogether; some went on to work in the labour unions, and some went abroad to escape suspicion. Kádár took none of these established solutions. He acknowledged his mistake, lifelong remorse hardened him, and he never again became such an easy prey; though he was expelled from the underground organization, he continued to consider himself a Communist. As wines have their vintages, so there are politicians—or artists, or writers—whose personalities are fully mature at a certain age, after which they neither improve nor deteriorate. Kádár, despite all the experience, cunning and political knowledge he later gained, retained all along the personality and mentality of a Hungarian Communist of the year 1933: class struggle always seemed to him as simple as it may have looked during the Depression, he hated the “opportunist” Social Democrats, and though he accepted the popular front policy for tactical purposes, it always remained alien to him. He was always to be lonely, distrustful and reticent: an illegal activist.

For years after his release nothing special happened to him. On his comrades' advice, which he took to be their command, he joined the Social Democratic organization in a Budapest district (the 6th), and became a leading figure among the young, later a member of the district committee. In 1940 he was told that he was a member of the illegal Hungarian Communist Party, which for a time meant no more than taking part in the direction of Communists active in the legal Social Democratic organizations. When, in the spring of 1942, hundreds of Communists were arrested, he became one of the five members of the Party's Central Committee, in which position he remained, with only a few intervals (spent in Horthy's and then

Rákosi's prisons), to the end of his life. During the war he was one of the leaders of the underground organization, which completely suited his disposition. Other reasons for choosing him included the fact that he wasn't a Jewish intellectual (or an intellectual, for that matter), and besides being a “Christian Hungarian working man,” his speech and look embodied a type: thin, raggedly good-looking but badly-dressed, careful and taciturn. Hungarian nationalism, which grew during the war, influenced many of the old members of organized labour. Kádár had been immune to any new influence since 1933.

Huszár devotes a mere forty pages to the years spent in the Social Democratic Party and then in the illegal Communist Party (1937–1944), though most readers would probably appreciate more information, and at least recollections of contemporaries, if original documents are unavailable. It would be good to know, for instance, why Kádár was never conscripted, or what love affairs he had. On the latter Huszár is not merely laconic, but substitutes his knowledge with the thesis that Kádár “had almost no private life” until he married in 1949, which is hardly likely. That he married late is another question: Kádár pleaded that a young wife would not tolerate his mother's cantankerousness, which Huszár accepts. I myself think Kádár was protecting his own loneliness, not so much from women as from marriage; his late marriage was successful, with a wife sharing his mentality and not wanting to enforce on him a lifestyle that would have been alien, such as any form of luxury or a great number of friends. Professor Huszár is a widely known sociologist (member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences) and is well-versed in psychology, two disciplines that benefit this biography. That he isn't a trained historian usually does not show in his book; when it sometimes does, it concerns his inability



to track down all sources, thus being forced to drop lines of inquiry, although these are cases of minor importance.

Most readers would probably appreciate the fact that four fifths of the book deals with the post-war decades (1945–1956), when Kádár's activity was linked with the fate of the country as one of the leaders of the party that was in power. Accordingly, these chapters throw light on major issues of the period that historians have failed to deal with or have misrepresented. Huszár makes it clear that from the beginning there was a brutal power struggle going on within the party elite, even if behind the façade of party discipline (and not openly, as in other parties). First Secretary Mátyás Rákosi, returning from exile in Moscow in 1945, knew he had to find a successor. Like his comrades arriving with him who took up leading posts, he was a Jewish intellectual who knew little about the daily life of the people, and he was old, in poor health and ugly. These were disadvantages at the coming (and then still democratic) elections, in a post-war public milieu saturated with nationalism and anti-Semitism. Keen-eyed, he chose the two best candidates as heirs: László Rajk, a 36-year-old teacher of French, and Kádár, 33, whom he knew from prison, where Kádár confessed his "sin" to him. Rajk was better educated and more experienced, had taken part in the Spanish Civil War and spent some time in a French internment camp and was good-looking. Kádár was second behind him, followed him in his positions, as secretary of the Budapest party committee, minister of the interior and deputy to Rákosi. But Rákosi had become embittered by the idea of relinquishing power, and started hating the pretenders of his own choice. He began to find fault with them and their past, until he became completely obsessed with the idea that no one could replace him. So, when he

liquidated the parliamentary system in 1948 and introduced a Soviet-style one-party dictatorship, he no longer cared that the people or the young found dashing Rajk or plebeian Kádár more attractive than him.

By that time Kádár was no longer as simple as his look and manners suggested: Huszár rightly points at Kádár's first important public speech, a lecture published by the party in 1945, in which he distinguishes an idealized working class that is rebuilding the country disinterestedly, and the selfish few, who will not abandon their "insignificant private" interests. Kádár knew that those few constituted the majority but, as a professional Communist politician, was aware of the fact that he had to represent an imaginary majority. He retained this duplicity to the end of his life: his declarations always thinly veiled an awareness of the real character of the working class, and revealed a wariness when it came to totally ignoring reality, unlike Rákosi and company. Yet he strived hard to learn from them, and Huszár is again acute in observing that "during these years he became an expert in applying Machiavellian tactics" against the Social Democratic Party, the churches, labour unions, etc. All this is illustrated at length, with examples.

In August 1948 Kádár became minister of the interior, replacing Rajk in this position: Rákosi chose the younger and less independent man, whom he thought he could influence. His tactics proved effective, as Kádár did all he could to be worthy of Rákosi's confidence, and helped to prepare the noose for Rajk. But not a year had passed after Rajk's execution when Rákosi told him he did not trust him. Why? Like Kádár, Huszár tries to put his finger on the reason. When Kádár had to watch the execution, instead of joining the condemning chorus, he fainted. He shared his doubts with Rákosi, who immediately became suspicious of him. "The first serious political



suspicion arose when Rajk was unmasked, and we noticed that he [Kádár] behaved unnaturally," said Rákosi at the 21 April 1951 meeting of the Political Committee, after Kádár was arrested. (The minutes are in Varga's book.) Rákosi all of a sudden remembered Kádár's youthful slip, and another one from 1943, when Kádár misunderstood the real meaning of the dissolution of the Comintern, and suggested breaking up the illegal Hungarian Communist Party, and forming a "Peace Party" instead with a popular front policy. Kádár fretted over these charges to the end of his life, even when he had come to understand Rákosi's motives. After all, the ÁVH (state security police) general Gábor Péter, who arrested him, had been his partner in dissolving the Communist Party, and co-leader of the underground party during the war, yet he was never charged with the "crimes" that Kádár was charged with. The solution is simple: once Kádár had become the main pretender, Rákosi and with him the frustrated Moscow staff, especially the power-hungry minister of defence, Mihály Farkas, started to hate him.

More than a year passed after Stalin's death before Kádár was released from prison. The man who came out was different from the man they had locked up. In the silence of his cell he had time enough to ponder, and on his release he did not rush to Rákosi to pour his soul out to him. He pretended to be a loyal supporter and an unselfish party man willing to settle for a position as district party secretary (in the Budapest district of his youth). Yet at this time he was already striving to defeat Rákosi. He feigned, until the spring of 1956, that he held Péter and Farkas (by then the official scapegoats and in prison), to have been responsible for the show trials and other illegal actions that had been openly exposed. This demonstrates that he was working on taking over the reins of power: otherwise he would have confront-

ed Rákosi immediately after his release. But it was not yet the time to start open combat. Until November 1956 Kádár strove towards his goal effectively. Huszár does a careful and meticulous job of reconstructing the mosaic of Kádár's way to power. (He thus clarifies the ambiguities surrounding the well-known story of Rákosi discovering the transcript of the audio tape taken at Rajk's interrogation, led by Kádár and Farkas, and trying to blackmail Kádár with it. Rákosi let Soviet Ambassador Andropov know what the tape contained, and wanted to play it for the Party leadership: but at their 26 April meeting the Political Committee decided against it, and resolved to take Kádár back into the top leadership.)

There is a point at which I find Huszár's empathy extravagant. When talking about Kádár's still mysterious journey on 1 November 1956, when he was driven to the Soviet embassy, then flown to Ungvár in the Ukraine and thence to Moscow, Huszár subscribes to the view that Kádár was trapped by the Russians, helped by Ferenc Münnich, who accompanied him. But Kádár in 1956 was not what he had been in 1949: he knew what it was that he chose or let happen. He may not have been told in advance where he would be taken, but he did not refuse. And had he been kidnapped, he couldn't have been forced to turn against Imre Nagy, and to assume power unless he wanted to do so. He did, and accepted the perhaps unexpected help.

I look forward to the second volume, and hope that in it the publisher will make up for the absence of an index, presumably due to shortage of time. That a bestseller should be printed on newspaper-quality paper is just another oddity in contemporary book publishing in Hungary.

László Varga, a historian and archivist, publishes the documents of the 1951 trial of Kádár, carefully tracing the devel-



opment of the false charge leading to the indictment, adhering, as far as possible, to the logic and timeline of the case. This was a rigged trial not only because it was founded on false charges, but because Kádár's case was linked to the case of a group (the Communist organizers of the "March Front") with which Kádár had had no political or personal relations. This makes the volume and Varga's introduction lopsided: the trial was effectively about the organizers of the March Front, to whom Kádár was connected via a false charge, whereas Varga is interested in Kádár; thus the introduction deals chiefly with him, just as the documents selected concentrate, whenever possible, on his person. Hence the reissue of the minutes of the 7 June 1949 interrogation of Rajk, in which Kádár had an active and shameful role, which has been published in several places. (*The Hungarian Quarterly*, No. 141, pp. 83–86.) There are several documents concerning Kádár's position between his rehabilitation in 1954 and 1956, while the story of the others is dropped at their rehabilitation. This inconsistency will trouble only the uninitiated reader: whoever knows what the March Front was (a popular-front type anti-fascist movement in 1937) will welcome this abundance of new information about it as it was, untainted by subsequent Communist and anti-Communist narratives.

If Huszár is sympathetic, Varga un-masks: it is very interesting to read them together, as Varga too follows Kádár's career from 1949 to 1956, and also deals with earlier events on which charges were based, such as his weakness when under arrest as a young man, and his role in the formal dissolution of the Communist Party in 1943. Varga pays close attention to Kádár's role in the trial of Rajk, pointing out that he was present at interrogations on more than one occasion and showing that he had a more important function in

designing the case than had hitherto been known. He has even settled the date on which Rákosi decided to have Rajk arrested. Varga provides Kádár's self-accusatory letters, which he wrote to Rákosi in the weeks preceding his arrest, and in which he admits that he had been jealous of Rajk as early as 1945: "when upon Rajk's return I was removed by the Party from the Budapest secretaryship, I felt neglected and injured." He retained his aversion towards Rajk even when he no longer believed in his guilt.

While Rajk's arrest came out of the blue, following a quick decision, Kádár was systematically tormented by Rákosi for almost half a year. He dismissed him from his position of minister of the interior, and though as deputy to Rákosi he seemed to fulfil an important role, the First Secretary indicated he was suspicious of him (as he had earlier told Moscow, in March 1950), made him write reports, until he was driven into the mental state of self-accusation. This is the key to Kádár's behaviour before the secret police and in court: Rajk for weeks entertained the hope that the truth would ultimately be revealed if he stuck to his guns, while Kádár had already been broken by the time of the arrest, knowing from experience that the arrest foreshadowed the court's decision, and thus he needed no third degree, unlike Rajk and his fellows. He fought for his version of the truth for a few days, but let it be known at the beginning that he would sign the false confession if asked. His case was not so much a show trial as a secret one, which is why it was of little importance what he and his fellows confessed to.

Varga is deeply interested in the mania of underground Communist parties: who was a traitor, who "sang" for the police, who behaved in court "like a real Communist"—and as doctors are sometimes infected with the disease they deal with, so



this mania sometimes seems to work on him. With hindsight these issues are less important, and I for one concur with Orwell, who pointed out that every man has a weak point, and the police have the time to find it. I have read enough court documents to know how difficult it is to reconstruct who was the first to confess, and what it was the police already knew. Varga, without knowing the documents of the 1925/26 trial of Rákosi, gives credence to hearsay about his "confession" and "betrayal," though these charges were invented by those who were at the time already intriguing against him in Moscow.

Which did not deter Rákosi from always "waking up to" whatever his current paranoia required. Thus he made Kádár responsible for the 1943 manoeuvre of dissolving the Communist Party, even though Gábor Péter, conducting the proceedings in 1951, sat next to Kádár when the decision was made, and gave his support. But Kádár was charged with making the decision in question at the behest of Social Democrat leader Árpád Szakasits, together with March Front members; indeed, it was claimed that Szakasits was instructed by the head of the Political Police, Sombor-Schweinitzer. That none of this was true was only admitted after Stalin's death, during the rehabilitation process—carried out mostly by the same individuals who originally drew up the false charges in 1951. Varga provides the main documents of the rehabilitation process, which are very illuminating, as far as the proceedings and the psychology of the prosecutors and the accused are concerned.

Varga makes a valuable contribution to understanding Kádár's behaviour after his release. Though Kádár was convinced that the time had come for him to replace Rákosi, he did not confront him until he could be sure Rákosi no longer enjoyed the support of Moscow; instead, he offered

him the opportunity to shift all the blame onto Mihály Farkas and Gábor Péter, and waited to see who would win out in the rivalry between Rákosi and Imre Nagy. Kádár's conduct between 1954 and 1956 has been commonly characterized as passive, which was otherwise typical of him, but which now, thanks to Varga's (and partly, Huszár's) accurate analysis, is shown to have been determined. He felt he had come near his goal in June 1956, when Suslov came to Budapest to examine in person whether Kádár was a potential successor of Rákosi. His decision was affirmative, though it came to pass, as so many decisions in Moscow, with an irreparable lag of months.

One of Varga's best insights is into how after 1954 Kádár was consciously relying on the sympathy of the Party apparatus. Refuting those who have held Kádár to have been the head of "the Party opposition" at the time (like András Hegedűs, prime minister in 1955/56, in his memoirs), he points out: "The case was more that the party apparatchiki—whose influence should not be undervalued in a party dictatorship—had grown weary of the unceasing movement of the pendulum, of the constant insecurity, of not being able to set their alignments and to adapt to the situation, and believed Kádár to be the point of rest, which could guarantee their survival. Kádár was suitable for this role—by his nature, too—and as the perfect embodiment of the apparatchik, the district party secretary, he readily united with them."

Varga's volume has an index, though there are minor mistakes in it, just as there are in the notes. For instance, Malinovsky, the notorious Okhrana agent, who could deceive Lenin himself (as Rákosi mentions in his speech at the Political Committee in April 1951), is confused in a note with the Soviet marshal whose troops liberated Budapest. ■



George Szirtes

# Draughtmanship under Pressure

János Kőbányai: *The Haggadah of the Apocalypse: Imre Ámos and his Times* (translated by János Bárti) 63 pp. Together with Imre Ámos: *The Szolnok Sketchbook in Facsimile*. Unnumbered pages. Budapest, Múlt és Jövő Könyvek, 2000.

Life does not get easier but, here, for us at least, it may not get as horrible as that for a while. On the other hand, I was reading at a poetry festival in England a few weeks ago, standing in for the American poet Charles Simic who found it hard to travel because of the attack on New York on 11 September, and, as I was taking part in a panel discussion, I was given (as were all the panellists) a prettily wrapped present. Inside the gift wrapping, addressed to the absent Simic, was a book of poems by a local writer in which there were lines such as, "We will weep no tears for Jewry / Whose own snotty gobbets have become the / sly self-seeking ploy of a Shylock", and much more along these lines. I never got to meet the author but it was clear from other references that he had been reading the *The Holocaust Industry* by Norman Finkelstein, and had taken considerable heart from it. My personal view is that Finkelstein is a courageous, if shrill, man and, alas, that too much of what he says may well be true. I wish it were not so. There is no monopoly of virtue, suffering or unscrupulousness. Yet I

cannot bring myself to like the man who wrote the lines I quote. He threatens me. Despite my complicated background I know full well that what I say of myself means nothing at all. The sophistication of self-definition is a luxury. Historical evidence suggests that others will usually tell you what you are and act accordingly. He would certainly tell me.

Though self-definition is a luxury, the joy of life lies in an intense and endless sophistication that survives the individual who embodies it. The greatest paradox is that human life is the measure of all values and, at the same time, it is practically worthless. So, when we read the poems of Miklós Radnóti or gaze at the paintings and drawings of Imre Ámos, this paradox is brought to our attention with peculiar force. The sense of tragedy suffuses the work: it transforms it utterly so that the smallest detail appears fated. The works are embodiments of fate, beyond the life itself, and that is why they serve as interpreters for the rest of us. Nothing is accident. Maybe it was the comprehension of this proposition that drew both Radnóti

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## George Szirtes's

*Selected Poems (1976–1996)* was published by Oxford University Press in 1996. His latest collection, *An English Apocalypse*, was published by Bloodaxe in 2001.



and Ámos towards their far from inevitable deaths. Both could have taken opportunities to avoid dying: neither did. In this sense their lives were worthless, but in the opposite sense they became the measure of all values.

Neither man was more than promising at the time the fateful process began. Radnóti's early poems are clever, elegant, intense but a little mannered, a little empty. Ámos's paintings are struggling for definition as he samples the various influences—the elective affinities, as Goethe called them—out of which his own visual language might develop. A quick glance at the range of his work between 1933 and 1940—from *The Water of Cleanliness* to *Painter Before Burning House*—shows a whole host of senior spirits hovering about him: Gauguin, Nolde, Bonnard, Ensor, Munch, Soutine, the Blaue Reiter and Brücke groups, Kokoschka—even Max Beckmann, not to mention his Hungarian contemporaries. He wants something sensuous, emotive, shocking and slightly mystical that might accord with his own perception of narrative and texture. He is also ambitious and deeply aware of certain currents of European Modernism, aware that he has to situate himself somewhere in that great and complex stream. Not in all parts of it, of course. Ámos shows no interest in Constructivism, Cubism, Dada or Surrealism; movements that depend on the application or subversion of reason as expressed in geometry, pure form and the working structures of the conscious mind. He shows no interest, but traces of them appear, much as they do, in his most influential and last model, Marc Chagall.

Chagall was born in 1889, Ámos in 1907. Chagall grew up against a background of Constructivism and Cubism as well as Expressionism, and his best work is a highly personal synthesis of the varieties

of space, form and cross-cutting narrative adopted by artists of those schools. In fact Chagall's best work was almost behind him by the time he and Ámos met. Chagall was old enough, as they say, to be the father of Ámos, but it is as well to remember that while Chagall had imitators, he was too much of a loner, too much of a 'naive' perhaps, to be anything but a large, fascinating if somewhat peripheral figure in what was beginning to be described as Modernism. Chagall's mysticism, the way the violence of his forms strengthened the passionate tenderness of his range of feeling and prevented them from collapsing into sentimentality, at least for the time being, was arguably the result of a violent change of life: he moved from being a provincial Jew in the backwaters of the Vitebsk *shtetl* to a cosmopolitan figure in Paris, the most cosmopolitan and modernist of cities. It was the collision between the two experiences that supplied the energy. As long as that energy remained it raised anecdote to myth, pathos to tragedy and delight to vision. It was something in Chagall's vision—in its symbolism and manner of delivery—that struck an important chord in Ámos.

János Kőbányai begins *The Haggadah of the Apocalypse* (Haggadah is the legendary element in the Talmud) by setting Radnóti and Ámos firmly in the tradition of prophets and seers, modifying this by reference to Walter Benjamin's notion of "the angel of history" whose face is turned back to the past, and who perceives chains of events as "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage". The prophesy therefore lies in the hindsight, which is to say that this notion of seerdom is nothing to do with fortune telling, or, if it is to be related to the future at all, it is posited as the visionary perception of grand archetypal patterns in historical cycles. It is a perception to which the



seer-poet, or the seer-artist may choose to, might indeed have to, sacrifice himself or herself.

Ámos, like Radnóti, came from a respectable lower-middle-class Jewish family. Like Radnóti, he lost his father early on, and, like him, found benefactors who supported his eccentric choice of career. Kőbányai draws close parallels between the lives of poet and painter: they were born within two years of each other; they married remarkable, beautiful and talented women in the same year, 1935; they both taught and undertook hack work; they both worked with Hungaricized names so Ungár became Ámos and Glatter became Radnóti; their first successes, relative as these were, can be dated to the beginning of the thirties, and so forth. This is a delicate path to follow. Two different artists of roughly the same age and background would have much in common with them, and it is sometimes salutary to set the bricks of fate into place with a certain reluctance. However, since Kőbányai's argument hinges on the prophetic nature of both Ámos and Radnóti's work in a Jewish context, he tries to descry the specifically Jewish patterns of seerdom.

This involves him in an examination of the relationship between Hungarian and Jewish self- and mutual-consciousness, and between Jewishness and Modernism. With considerable lucidity (the English text translated by John Bátki is a great help here), he rehearses the arguments about doomed Jewish efforts at assimilation. He talks about two "divergent life strategies: that of the *self-effacing assimilationist* and that of the *multicultural integrationist*." But, he continues, "both these paths were to converge in a shared fate at the moment of apocalypse". In the last days of their lives, the "continual state of uncertainty, waiting for 'news of hope or horror'... in

the nearness of death", also brought poet and painter, "the spaciousness and grace of Apocalyptic vision."

Kőbányai effectively traces the motifs and subjects of Ámos's apocalyptic drawings in terms of Jewish iconography, derived from his childhood in the Hasidic Jewish community of Nagykálló, a community Kőbányai compares with Chagall's Hasidic *shtetl* at Vitebsk. He quotes Ámos's journal for 1937 where the painter contemplates his potential subjects: "I am full of remembered images and layers of conscious and subconscious deposits of mystical childhood fables (the atmosphere of Kálló, my grandfather's Talmudic tales and explanations), these are the things that I should paint." He shows how Ámos was driven ever closer to his identification with the prophetic or angelic role, a process which, vitally for Kőbányai's case, entailed the artist fully embracing his Jewishness. Ámos's greatness, in other words, is directly a function of the role of the Jew in history, a role that is both sacrificial and messianic.

Most of this is undoubtedly true and heart-breaking. The "spaciousness and grace of Apocalyptic vision" is bought at enormous cost, but we, who are readers and lookers-on, have to be very careful in our projections. We cannot live and suffer vicariously.

In 1935 Ámos made a drawing he called *I Am Dreaming of Chagall*. It was two years before he met the Russian and the drawing is based on one of Chagall's own self-portraits. It shows, Kőbányai explains, the face of Chagall "between two hands opened in rabbinical blessing, using this ancient gesture to allude to their affinity, and to the artist's claim to the chosen role of priest in the modern world." This interpretation may be a step too far, as may Kőbányai's belief that Chagall "was the



first ... to elevate the folklore of East-European Jewry ... onto the highest peaks of international art". Chagall certainly employed such folklore, but there is, I suggest, some doubt about how far it was the folklore itself that was thus elevated. The tendency of scholars of all backgrounds is to substitute the iconography for the phenomenon, and to imagine that a set of half-conscious references constitutes an iconography. Ámos's relationship to Chagall is deep but not simple. Together with his wife, Margit Anna, he visited Chagall as an admirer in Paris in 1937. They laid their works out before him and Chagall encouraged them both to stay in Paris to develop their art. Chagall himself left Paris four years later. I have said that Chagall's best work was almost behind him at this time, but though his formal development had stalled and his painting had begun to ease itself into a sentimental shorthand, the ever more intense persecution of the Jews in Europe had goaded him into a last surge of iconographical innovation. The sheer soppieness of a work like *Angel with Red Wings* (1935) is redeemed by the tragic hyperactivity of *White Crucifixion* (1938) and the deeply melancholic assertion of love in *Time Is a River Without Banks* (1939). After his arrival in the United States there remained a few major works, like *Between Darkness and Light* (1943). But these were beginning to drown in the slick and rather comfortable resumes of his own career that dominate his later life.

Nevertheless, Chagall offered Ámos reassurance that an art made out of a life such as his was possible, and that the language of such an art might be just around the corner. It was that language that Ámos was feverishly seeking. To look through Ámos's *Szolnok Sketchbook*, whose facsimile presentation is clearly intended to parallel the facsimile edition of Radnóti's

*Bori Notesz* (the Bor Notebook), is like watching an edifice being constructed in a desperate rush. The drawings are made with swift nervous strokes of the pen. Fluffed lines are corrected on the spot; figures are redefined; blots are immediately integrated into the design; motifs such as angels appear on successive pages; a recumbent figure in one drawing suggests a recumbent figure in the next; trees appear, last for a drawing or two, then disappear again. There are occasional shots at portraiture and sketches from observation, such as an officer looking at a pile of spades leaning against a wall. Some drawings are pure symbolism: the lion on a man's head, the decapitated piper with his classical head lying on a sword; crucifixions and violins. There are also drawings full of nostalgia for home and Margit Anna, pastoral scenes of calm and death. The drawings are inevitably scraps. They owe something to Chagall but are far more agitated. It is the agitation as much as the iconography that matters. It is the draughtsmanship under pressure as much as the world of ideas. The facsimile presentation turns the little spiral-bound sketchbook into a relic or an icon. Thus, thus it was! the object cries: and thus it was, we cannot help but see.

Ámos's war experience was that of many male Jews: a sequence of demanding, often murderous labour camps, followed, at the point of exhaustion, by execution. It is true, as Kőbányai says, that substantial work remains to be done on Ámos's archives. It is certainly true that when I consult my *Oxford Companion to Art* I find a long entry on Chagall and nothing about Ámos. It may also be true that the suppression of Radnóti's Jewishness may have helped him to achieve national and international stature (I am not convinced of the effectiveness of the suppression) while the overt declaration of Ámos's



might have been a disadvantage to him. There are certainly some pretty dark passages in the history of Jews in Hungary. It may of course be simply that Radnóti is greater in his sphere than Ámos is in his. It is possible that the decline in Chagall's reputation has an effect on Ámos too (but how wonderful, vigorous and humane the early Chagall was!) It may be that Hungarian artists generally seem to have occupied peripheral places in European painting—unless they left Hungary.

Much is possible. It is certain that Ámos was a striking and tragic artist, who was driven by 'the spaciousness and grace' of Apocalypse to assume a role that transcended the busy commerce of art and art production. There is greatness in him, but it is complicated. I have a slight unease about the facsimile, about its role as relic, as com-

modity, and as politics. I don't think artists and poets set out to be prophets and martyrs, and I worry about using them as such.

This is not a matter of some 'moral high-ground' or even of rational wisdom but of 'irrational' feeling. It is the feeling that alters the mode of perception: the prophet sees by feeling. It was 'irrational' for Radnóti and Ámos to walk straight past the last open door of opportunity. They did it by feeling. "I strove only to show how a man, called upon to be a prophet, progressed towards the angelic state of being" says Kőbányai. I prefer to imagine the poet blinded, uncalled, feeling his way forward towards one clear sound, of whose meaning he himself is utterly ignorant. It may be, that in this case, someone had dropped a dark hood on his head. Very well then, says the poet. I shall wear it. ■



Gábor Gyáni

## In the New World

Julianna Puskás: *Ties That Bind, Ties That Divide. 100 Years of Hungarian Experience in the United States*. New York/London, Holmes and Meier, 2000, 444 pp.

It was Julianna Puskás's research that first drew the attention of Hungarian historians to immigrant Hungarians in America. At a time when national historiography is losing prestige due to new trends in post-national development, emigration has gained considerable weight here as a research topic. In the international discussion on the issue, historians who had been representing the national historiography of their particular country suddenly found themselves outside the limits of their national disciplines.

Thus it is no coincidence that Julianna Puskás's new book on the subject has been published not in Hungarian but in English, and not in Hungary but in the United States, as part of the Ellis Island Series, previous volumes of which have dealt with Jewish emigration from Germany, Dutch immigration to the United States and emigration from South-East Asia. Unusually, a book by a Hungarian historian on Hungarian history is being published outside Hungary and this fact is an indication that the author's work has aroused more interest and has earned her

higher recognition abroad than in her homeland.

Her book provides a synthesis of several decades of research on the emigration of people (not just Hungarians) from Hungary to the United States and the history of Hungarians (but not all immigrants from Hungary) living in America. Her previous works on the subject provide the backdrop to her current publication. The most notable is her lengthy 1982 book, *Hungarian Emigrants to the United States 1880–1940*, the first part of which was also published in English by Akadémiai Kiadó, the publishing house of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The English-language version, however, contained only half of the original text. It simply covered the topic of emigration; the section discussing the history of the Hungarians living in America was available in Hungarian only.

This means that this is the first complete English-language work to discuss the topic as a whole. Naturally, the author relies heavily on her previous publications, but she goes beyond them in several areas. First of all, she has extended the scope of

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Gábor Gyáni's

publications in English include *Women as Domestic Servants: The Case of Budapest (1989)*. His latest book is on remembering, memory and historical discourse.



her enquiries. Instead of 1940, she has made 1956 the *terminus ad quem* of her research, enabling her to deal with the issue of how the refugee question effected immigration to the United States during and after the Hungarian Revolution. As expected, this adjustment has also resulted in a change of authorial perspective.

During the 1980's, Puskás organized an international conference in Budapest, which provided historians from Central and South-Eastern Europe with the opportunity to discuss the most important issues of emigration from the region. Several years later, the papers given at the conference were published in English (Puskás, Julianna, ed.: *Overseas Migration from East-Central and Southeastern Europe 1880-1940*. Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 1990). Puskás's undertaking is evidence that for most of the national historiographies in this part of Europe, the issue of emigration is still a highly relevant argument in the debate over the legitimacy of certain nations. Puskás and a few of her German colleagues seemed to be the only exceptions—but exceptions only strengthen the rule. Back then, as far as historians from Central and Southeastern Europe were concerned, the primary importance of emigration to America was the ability of the emigrants to contribute to the building of a future nation-state. The growing national identity of American ethnic communities had a revitalizing effect on the struggle for national sovereignty in the region.

But Puskás's methodological approach of the time bears even more significance for us. With her book on emigration now some years behind her, she has altered the scale of her enquiries. She has gone to the micro-level, to trace and describe in minute detail all the people who emigrated to America from Szamosszeg, the village where she herself was born. The primary

use of this method of investigation was to show how *chain migration* worked. As a result, she placed smaller emphasis on the macro-structural and usually economic motives behind emigration (poverty, the desire to own land, the irregularities of the labour market) than before. By showing that chain migration also exists at the micro-level, she has sought to prove that pull factors have a greater role in inducing emigration than push factors.

In the introduction to her new book, Puskás describes how both her experiences as a historian and as a human being have prompted her to research the topic of immigration to America. When she started as a historian, she became interested in the problems of the agrarian community in the time of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and during the Horthy era. Thus she began to research the history of the social class that constitutes one of the most important agents of migration.

Another factor in her fondness for the topic was that ever since her early childhood, her life had been closely entwined with that of the emigrants. Besides the existing emotional links, this circumstance also came to bear considerable significance during her research. The emigrants did not look upon Puskás simply as a historian conducting research, but accepted her as one of their own. As a result, she was able to get close to the members of the communities living in the United States and the remigrated people in Hungary, and could thus approach them with the intention of making interviews or collecting information. For Puskás, her special situation was a source of intellectual inspiration that enabled her to adopt an understanding approach to the subject. This intertwining of her experiences as a historian and as an individual led her to develop the anthropological empathy that is characteristic of her research, regardless of



where it is conducted, in Szamosszeg, New Brunswick or Cleveland.

The first third of this new book explores the issue of economic emigration at the turn of the 20th century. Besides giving an idea of the scale, the stages and the various motives that drove migration, she also portrays the image that the emigrants crafted within themselves of the country they were entering, how the issue of emigration was shaped by politics and public opinion in America and in Hungary, and, finally, the effects and repercussions of large-scale emigration and remigration on the countries involved.

In the second part of the book we find an equally detailed account of the life of the Hungarian ethnic communities in America between 1880 and 1920. Puskás describes the factories and mines where the largest number of Hungarian immigrants worked. She also discusses how these people settled and lived, the "household" communities they formed (through the so-called boarding houses), the immigrant press, the religious and secular ethnic organizations that played a leading role in their communal life, and their relationship with American and Hungarian political circles. She illustrates the severe dilemma caused by the First World War, when Hungarian immigrants were bound by conflicting political loyalties.

The third part of the book is devoted to showing how this conflict shaped and was eventually resolved. Its title, *Under the Pressure of Assimilation*, provides a good summary of the content. First, Puskás emphasizes the significance of the quotas that were introduced during this period, which put an end to the liberal immigration policy that had long been characteristic of the United States. Then she demonstrates how the immigrants interpreted American attempts at assimilation: "Let's be American; Let's remain Hungarian."

This meant that the Hungarians who stayed on in the United States (and their children, who were born there) were no longer just flotsam and jetsam, who would eventually return to their homeland (as did at least forty per cent of immigrants before 1914). On the contrary, from then on, they would be considered as belonging to their recipient country. The task of creating and maintaining the Hungarian ethnic community's new identity rested for the most part on the shoulders of various religious and secular ethnic associations (primarily relief societies), with the active participation of the immigrant press.

During the 1930's, however, a radical break occurred within the community. Up to that time, the immigrants had formed a more or less homogeneous group, but in the years of the Great Depression, class differences within the community became increasingly obvious. Economic hardships also made it inevitable for working class immigrants to develop close links with their American counterparts who were in a similar situation. In addition, second generation immigrants who attended American schools and were more upwardly mobile, slowly drifted away from the close-knit ethnic communities of their parents. As a result, they gradually gave up a Hungarian identity which had lost its meaning to them.

The outbreak of the Second World War brought yet another identity crisis for the already divided Hungarian Americans. But this time, the upheaval was not as great as it had been in 1914. The First World War had filled most immigrants with fear because they instinctively sided with their homeland, which had become an enemy of the United States. By 1940, however, it became clear that the immigrants considered America to be their new home. Therefore, as loyal citizens of the US, they regarded it their duty to support the political forces



opposed to those of their homeland. The majority who behaved this way did so despite the fact that they still had not entirely given up their Hungarian identity. The conservative immigrant elite made some feigned attempts to preserve this identity, but this only led to the uncertainty which arises from the feeling of not belonging anywhere.

The period following the Second World War marked the beginning of a new era for Hungarian Americans. The two successive waves of immigrants who headed for the United States during the 1940's and 1950's left Hungary for political reasons. The people who flooded America (in their tens of thousands) after 1945 were primarily right-wing or anti-Communist political refugees, the so-called DPs (displaced persons). A good number of the 200,000 refugees who fled the country when the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 was crushed, also made for the United States. By the end of 1957, the American authorities had registered nearly 32,000 new Hungarian immigrants, the majority of whom were from the educated middle classes.

Almost all of the DPs soon became de-classed in America, but at least they gave the Hungarian ethnic community a new political direction. On the other hand, as a result of federal policies and common practice, most of the predominantly young refugees who arrived after 1956—the so-called freedom fighters—were admitted to American universities. Thus, even if they maintained their Hungarian identity, they assimilated into American society more than any previous group of immigrants had done.

By the 1970's, concludes Puskás, the Hungarian *collective identity* of the post-Second World War immigrants, just like that of the second or third generation descendants of the turn-of-the-century immigrants, had been replaced with an

American *personal identity*. What accelerated and then made this process irreversible was the slow decline of the ethnic community's institutions (relief societies, religious organizations). The fact that many of the immigrants barely or no longer spoke Hungarian and that ethnic affiliations no longer played a role in marriages were also clear signs of assimilation.

Puskás's book is a convincing account of the history of Hungarian immigration and of ethnic Hungarians in the United States. Here I have only provided a brief outline of what the author presents with the aid of a remarkable number of sources and a wide knowledge of the scholarly literature on the topic. The only area where we may have reservations is the author's use of the micro-historical method during her research. She has collected a substantial amount of sources and new information (oral history) on the plight of the Hungarian immigrants who travelled back and forth between Szamosszeg and the United States for some time, then finally decided to settle overseas, but ended up moving on even further, until they were dispersed. But she uses all this data to illustrate the process of chain migration only, whereas it would be just as beneficial in understanding the motives for emigration, or the ever-changing identities of the immigrants.

Puskás, however, fails to take advantage of this opportunity. In the fourth chapter of her book, she discusses the motives for emigration, but this analysis is based on rather biased sources ("*You ask me why I came...*"). These are of two types: Hungarian immigrants' personal accounts published in the immigrant press in America, and recollections gathered by the author decades later, when some of the emigrants returned to Hungary (oral history). These two types of sources provide



conflicting evidence about the same phenomenon, which is understandable. It is less understandable why Puskás does not interpret the texts or provide sufficient comment on them. Neither does she offer an explanation for the differences between them. As it is, she follows the procedure adopted in her 1982 volume, when she published the texts in the appendix. What is more, the sources made available in her new book do not match the quantity presented in her older publication.

Thus the conclusions drawn by Puskás do not rely entirely on her sources either. It is on page 68 that she affirms for the first time that the assumptions of macro-structural research were steadily confirmed by micro-level analysis. But it would be a rather poor result if this was all we could deduce from the laborious micro-historical method, since the findings are expected to modify, or at least enhance, the correlations drawn up by macro-structural research.

The micro-level analysis has shown, continues Puskás, how many immigrants were motivated by cultural rationale, or their desire to reunite their family, rather than economic considerations. Finally, she concludes that young people were drawn to America by the better prospects of self-realization rather than family ties. The latter, incidentally, usually manifested itself in, or was prompted by, the desire to get rich, that is the opportunity to improve the family's living conditions at home by emigrating (to repay debts, acquire land, etc.). But all these conclusions are drawn without any reflection on the sources quoted.

The accounts written by young immigrants which were published by the immigrant press almost always focus on personal reasons for taking the big leap. The immigrants often justify their decision by experiences that they underwent only after they arrived, such as the individualistic en-

vironment or the greater degree of freedom. The oral accounts of those who returned and were questioned later, during the 1970's and 1980's, usually mention family reasons to explain their decision to return.

This obvious difference between the two types of sources could perhaps be the result of the age gap between the two groups, but it may also have been influenced by the interviewees' place of residence at the time of recording; whether they were still living in the United States, or whether they had already moved back to Hungary. Another influencing factor may have been the expectations towards the interviewees (the editors of the immigrant papers often interfered with the contents of the articles), what questions they were asked, how the elderly immigrants and the accounts were presented by Hungarian journalists, etc. These considerations of source criticism lead us to doubt both sources until it becomes clear what effect the differences have on the meaning of the accounts. It would not be the best solution to set up a complementary relationship between the two, assuming that they are merely two different aspects of reality.

In the second part of her book, Puskás settles the meaning of the accounts from the immigrant newspaper *Szabadság* (Freedom) by declaring that family ties and financial considerations were important at the time of emigration, but after a protracted stay in America, immigrants "drastically altered their plans" as they became part of American culture (page 85). This line of thinking is not convincing, since it is Puskás herself who shows that forty per cent of the Hungarian immigrants to America worked as miners (page 119). As far as the miners are concerned, the author writes that they lived in exceptionally tight and strict personal dependence that is comparable only to their lives in



Hungary. For example, she notes that in the mining settlements in West Virginia, the relationship between the immigrants and their employers and landlords was "a condition not of landlord and tenant, but of master and servant" (p. 121). Thus it seems that accommodation to American culture could not have been as general, swift and effortless as we are led to believe on the basis of the accounts from the immigrant paper *Szabadság*.

The second point worth mentioning is also in connection with the subsequent process of accommodation. How do we assess the immigrant masses' integration into American society? This is a question of fundamental importance, and there are two possible but significantly different answers to it. The first one is based on the theory of rootlessness, the second on the theory of transplantation.

Although it is common practice to attribute the theory of rootlessness to Oscar Handlin's 1951 volume *The Uprooted*, the concept goes back a further half a century in time, to F. J. Turner's frontier thesis of 1893. According to Turner, the American frontier, moving steadily westward, had a significant impact on the history of the United States through the constant battle for expansion. This resulted in the shaping of a unique American national character of overt individualism and passionate egalitarianism, much different from European national characteristics. Thus, when faced with a much higher degree of personal freedom than they had been accustomed to, a fate of despondency and loneliness awaited most of the European peasants who had their communal lifestyle suddenly and drastically torn away from them when they emigrated to America, even when this brought them, on the other hand, a higher degree of personal freedom. To counterbalance the theory of rootlessness, the theory of transplantation came to be

adopted in the seventies and eighties.

In the matter of Hungarian immigration to the United States and the history of ethnic Hungarians in America, Puskás adopts the middle way between the two theories. It is indisputable, however, that her sporadic efforts at empirical research are closer to supporting the continuity between the homeland and the New World. Thus, her work bears witness more to the theory of transplantation, as does the considerable emphasis she places on chain migration. Puskás even goes a step further when she attributes a communal nature to the immigrants' tendency to move on frequently within the United States. In addition, she sheds light on several features of miners' lives that are closely related to the Hungarian existence they left behind, for example such signs of self-sufficiency as vegetable gardens and animal husbandry. These facts also seem to support the theory of continuity.

Puskás is not the first historian to face this problem. Zoltán Fejős also dealt with it in his volume *Two Generations of Hungarians in Chicago 1890-1940*, which was published in 1993. He posed the question in the title of one of his chapters: *Rootless? Transplanted?* Although Fejős did not give a definite answer, he evidently opted for the theory of transplantation. But neither he nor Puskás make it clear whether the communal life of immigrants, which was so lively in the United States, and the communal identity that arose (partly) from it, were really the result of this continuity, or of something else, such as the tendency of Americans to "breed" ethnicity.

In my opinion it is Dirk Hoerder who provides the most plausible explanation for this debated issue. In his view, the ethnic communities in the United States do not intend to keep their members at an arm's length from American society. On



the contrary, they are alone capable of creating the steady financial and emotional conditions that are necessary for eventual assimilation (*People on the Move*, 1993). Thus it is the newly created communal principles and survival strategies that seem to bear primary importance, not the ones that had been taken over from the immigrants' homeland or those that were revived. It was the unique environment of the United States that led to the evolution of the spirited religious organizations, the unusually lively relief societies, or the public manifestations of the ethnic symbols presented in a cultural guise, as described by Puskás and Fejős.

Puskás places special emphasis on the role of the small intellectual (and later entrepreneurial) elite in creating and maintaining the emotional atmosphere and institutional structure of the Hungarian immigrant community. From the perspective of our review, this is not crucially important. What is decisive, however, is that Puskás also stresses the prominent role of women in these activities. It was the women who maintained the links between communities in America and at home, they organized the day-to-day lives of the predominantly male ethnic groups, and it was also the women who ensured that the community would continue to abide by the same set of ethical values as in their homeland.

Finally, we have arrived at the question of interpreting assimilation. Puskás provides a thorough analysis of the assimilation of Hungarian immigrants that began after 1920. But she neglects to provide a definition for the term, leaving the way open for potential misunderstandings. It is difficult to interpret the American efforts at assimilation and the "Let's be American; Let's remain Hungarian" slogan of the 1920's ignoring the norms and the expect-

tations that the Hungarian immigrants faced during their acculturation. This consideration is also important because, as far as assimilation is concerned, American expectations did not always match the norms of European countries.

In his 1964 book, *Assimilation in American Life*, Milton Gordon differentiates between three terms or expectations in assimilation that are unique to the United States. Of the three concepts, only the first, Anglo-conformity bears any resemblance to the European interpretation of assimilation. Anglo-conformity requires immigrants to assimilate unconditionally to the indigeneous (white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant) population. But at the time when the largest number of Hungarian immigrants arrived in America, the theory of the melting pot was also widely known and accepted. This concept does not favour absolute and one-sided assimilation, but rather the creation of a new national cultural identity, arising from diversity and interbreeding. If my interpretation of the efforts to assimilate the Hungarian immigrants during the 1920's is correct, then this campaign of adaptation, which Puskás reckons to have been strictly enforced, was more in line with the theory of the melting pot.

The last of Gordon's unique terms or concepts concerning assimilation is *cultural pluralism*. This concept was formulated at the beginning of the 20th century, but its widespread use came only later, after the Second World War. Cultural pluralism acknowledges the simultaneous legitimacy of the structurally diverse ethnic groups, immigrant enclaves and religious enclaves. Therefore it does not establish any expectations towards the coexisting ethnic communities or races (if we consider black Americans too) beyond basic adjustment to American society. (Nowadays, even this requirement is often drop-



ped; the spread of the Spanish language in the United States is a case in point.)

Since several shifts are observable in the American attitude towards immigrants as one concept was replaced by another, it is impossible to interpret the assimilation of the various groups of Hungarian immigrants according to European norms only. But because Puskás does not even mention this uniquely American background to assimilation, and concentrates solely on the efforts and internal dilemmas of the Hungarian ethnic community, her history of Hungarian immigration to America—despite the detailed and thorough analysis—remains somewhat incomplete. At this point, however, I am becoming uncertain myself. Perhaps assimilation is not the best term at all to describe what happened to Hungarian Americans during the 1920's.

It is possible that the same uncertainty underlies the efforts of some American scholars to replace the notion of assimilation with that of incorporation. Incorporation refers to the fact that the various ethnic or racial groups of immigrants do not fuse even after a longer period of time completely. On the contrary, they maintain their position within the unequal ethnic system of the country. This position will be the same as what they were assigned by the functioning of the system

upon entry (Silvia Pedrazza-Baily: "Immigration Research: A Conceptual Map." *Social Science History*, 14:1, Spring 1990).

This structurally defined position (usually that of the unskilled worker), together with ethnic, racial and other factors, determined the life of several generations of Hungarian immigrants within the hierarchy of American society. Perhaps because of the lack of appropriate sources, Puskás is unable to illustrate this process of integration with the meticulousness that we have come to expect from her. In addition, it remains unclear whether Hungarian immigrants exhibited any exceptional characteristics in comparison to other ethnic groups who arrived in the United States at the same time. It is indisputable, however, that these pre-determined circumstances quickly lost some of their significance in the case of those immigrants who, through a greater degree of social mobility, were able to enter those layers of society that were partially or completely free of ethnic considerations or, in other words, reached the phase of structural assimilation.

It's a pity that Julianna Puskás's new book is available only to a small number of people in Hungary. It is a valuable product of Hungarian historiography and among the best studies ever dedicated to the history of American immigration and ethnicity. ■



Éva Várhegyi  
**Bon Appétit!**

*Pénzügyminiszterek reggelire. Békesi Lászlóval, Bokros Lajossal, Kupa Mihállyal, Medgyessy Péterrel, Rabár Ferencsel, Szabó Ivánnal Rádai Eszter beszélget.*

(Ministers of Finance for Breakfast. Eszter Rádai in Conversation with László Békesi, Lajos Bokros, Mihály Kupa, Péter Medgyessy, Ferenc Rabár and Iván Szabó. Budapest, Beszélő-Helikon, 2001, 299 pp.)

For one who prefers newspapers for breakfast, I would leave non-fiction books for lunch, and have literature at a more relaxed time, for supper. Eszter Rádai's interviews with six post-transition ministers of finance can, however, be read on any occasion, if we concentrate perhaps on different features according to the time of the day and our appetite.

If read for breakfast, I suggest focusing on the questions as, thanks to a competent interviewer, the questions alone provide a comprehensive economic-political digest of Hungary in the eighties and nineties. Though the interviewees filled their ministerial positions in the three governments of the two parliamentary terms between 1990 and 1998, two of them also represent the eighties, which means we get a hint of what was cooking in the last years of the Communist regime. Conditions were apparently chaotic, since Lajos Bokros, then a researcher at one of the Ministry of Finance's institutes, a party member, could for long publish under a pseudonym in the then samizdat, *Beszélő*

under the pen-name Rikárdó Dávid, maintain friendly relations with radical intellectuals, and discuss his subversive writings in the bugged homes of opposition figures. A few pages later there is an opportunity to glance at the other side of this near-idyllic state, where the ambitious minister of finance (Péter Medgyessy) agrees to behave like a well-disciplined commissar and dissolve the institute which gave a home to such double-dealers.

Eszter Rádai has a sound memory, so she easily finds a match for this story in the brave new world as well. She reminds us (and the person involved) that even two years after the transition, an alert minister could be induced to take part in a political game, this time to blackmail the public media and humiliate the generally respected president of the state-owned television station. The embarrassing stories recalled force us again to acknowledge sadly that arguments like "I couldn't possibly resign, I had a mission to accomplish" will always find the appropriate person to utter them, regardless of regime. And this despite the

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fact that the persons interviewed are intelligent and talented figures, whom we are ready to believe they believe themselves to be the best man for the job.

**B**ut the volume can be recommended not only for its uncomfortable questions and awkward answers. At least as exciting are the images that come to be formed of the governments involved—a dish for lunch, I presume. Eszter Rádai cunningly directs the conversation into areas where the inside story frequently comes out. She has the skill to wring the kind of information from her victims, by appealing to their vanity or self-importance, which they wouldn't have given up themselves. She's nothing like those reporters we call microphone stands.

From the ministers we get titbits about the none too human resource policies of József Antall and Gyula Horn, power struggles among cabinet members (the informants themselves very much included), the clash of noble and ignoble considerations; in a word, a number of "human" interactions which the naïve subject would think can belong only to the private sphere. Of course, readers who have lived through the past ten years cannot be very naïve. They will know that even if the most talented and well-intentioned of the candidates come into power (and they're not always the ones to get there), their actions will not necessarily be directed by rationality and a care for the common good. And if they have even the vaguest ideas about economics, these readers will know that not even under the rule of the best-informed minister of finance did things always work out the way they were supposed to, that a large number of forced compromises or what were thought to be so, were made so that at least a portion of the archfinancier's ideas could be tested in practice.

And this is true even if we acknowledge that things could have worked out more disadvantageously. We must admit that without the economic policy of the late eighties, hallmarked by Medgyessy, Kupa and Békesi, it would have been more difficult for the Hungarian economy to adapt to the new post-changeover conditions. It was then that a considerable liberalization of the economy started, which brought the country nearer to a market economy, and furthered its global integration. The 1988 reform of the revenue system; the first steps to liberalize prices; the abolishment of foreign-trade restrictions; and allowing banks to deal freely in foreign currency were milestones in the process.

Ferenc Rabár, the first minister of finance (May–December 1990) in the first post-changeover, right of centre, government, sounds convincing when he says he tried to develop the economy along the lines of liberalization laid down by his predecessors, and that it was not his fault that the Antall government did not give him an opportunity to carry out his plans. We may acknowledge that without the "transitional" financial law package of Mihály Kupa (December 1990–February 1993) the economy wouldn't have been able to rid itself of its unsuitable participants. The Act on Accounting, meant to stop entering fictitious earnings into accounts, the Act on Banking, which forced banks to follow more prudent policies, and the Act on Bankruptcy, which resolved debt chains, in which a number of companies owed one another, all being insolvent—these laws not only created the financial discipline customary in a market economy, but also laid the foundations for rebuilding the economy. At considerable social costs (bankruptcies, wind-ups, unemployment, billions pumped into banks), all this allowed the inefficient old to be replaced by more viable structures. Mihály Kupa in his



programme promised a budget reform as well—and he may have put it through had he not been dismissed untimely. He was followed by Iván Szabó (1993–1994), who with the then central bank president Péter Ákos Bod initiated a reflation policy which soon upset the balance of trade: the deficit grew to almost 10 per cent of the GDP in 1994. Initially a relaxed monetary policy, coupled with unjustified interest rate reductions, and later, before the general elections, increased budgetary spending, led to the drying up of domestic savings, while imports grew far too quickly.

We may believe of the first minister of finance in Gyula Horn's Socialist government, László Békesi (who had filled the same position in 1989–1990) that he had not only the programme but the determination as well to rescue an economy which his predecessor had brought to the brink of crisis: all he was lacking was the political support of his party. At the turn of 1994/95, when an upset balance was aggravated by the consequences of the crisis in Mexico, the country was nearly insolvent. To the rescue came Lajos Bokros in 1995, whose stabilization programme, including the introduction of the crawling peg devaluation of the currency (with the backing of National Bank President György Surányi), provided for sustainable development. The last minister to be featured in the book, Péter Medgyessy, took over from that absolute champion of unpopularity, Bokros, in 1996. He will be noted in the annals of the Hungarian economy for the introduction of a reformed old-age pensions system. His argument is also acceptable, namely, that nothing more could be done in such a short period before the 1998 elections: the people, raised under paternalist wings, could not possibly be exposed to all the consequences of a general reform of social security.

These interviews with those six ministers who worked in the first two parliamentary periods outline the rugged road to the present course of development. But even if we admit that all six of them have contributed something to a position that started to turn favourable by 1997/98, we shouldn't shut our eyes to their errors. Iván Szabó was not the only one to make mistakes, if his were the gravest, his monetary policy upsetting the balance, almost sending the economy into crisis. If Békesi had a keen eye for diagnosis, he lacked the power to act. The courage and assurance of Bokros was needed to break the cycle of error and set the economy on a new course. It's probably not his fault that he lost the support of his prime minister so soon, yet his lack of communication skills was also responsible for the resentment of a great many people. Medgyessy, more successful as a communicator, probably could have launched more reforms, as he had inherited a consolidated economy.

Eszter Rádai is no shrinking violet. Like a tenacious bulldog, she finds and grips the weakest point in character: principles given up all too easily, decisions made too late or shunned; she even charges two of them with incompetence. The interviewees are not shrinking violets either (or else they would never have become politicians), and explain the inexplicable, try time and again to convince everyone (themselves included) that they always did their utmost, and always with perfect timing; the two gentlemen charged with incompetence undertake to clarify why it is an excellent idea for financial policy not to be laid out by dyed-in-the-wool finance professionals.

For dinner I recommend the portraits and personality profiles, as well as the monologues, which together form dialogues, thanks to the editor. How does a minister of finance talk about himself and his colleagues? How does he evaluate his rivals?



Who does he disparage, and who does he praise? Who does he mention as a model, helper or friend, who are his antagonists or enemies? These interviews, which originally appeared in the erstwhile samizdat journal, *Beszélő*, now collected in a volume, enter into a conversation with one another: you felt compelled to turn to pages backwards all the time, to see what the other said about—the same thing. *Beszélő* is a fitting label for the volume, (a pun, meaning both “speaker” and “visiting hours in prison”) it seems to describe the situation as a chance given to the ex-ministers to articulate their feelings after years of—benevolent—silence.

The photographs are expressive. Rabár's scared eyes, with which he couldn't overcome the machinations of his own government, but which saved the day when cab drivers' roadblocks threatened crisis. Kupa's self-assured smile, which oddly enough made him generally liked. Iván Szabó's honest look, which earned him respect even from those who thought him a poor minister of finance. Bokros's supercilious calmness, which easily gave the willies to his opponents. Medgyessy's care-laden brow, with which he emphasizes a professional look. Only Békesi's portrait is bad, in profile: he should have been represented full face, with painful eyes, as we remember him from the summer of 1994.

Of course we'll never come to love them. It's difficult to love infallible deities.

Readers, especially if they have never been a minister, are often shocked by the self-confidence and assurance these gentlemen possess. None of them has ever made a mistake in his work, there's almost nothing they would do differently now. We wouldn't be surprised to learn of a few mistakes even by those who became ministers with a sound professional background, but the haughtiness of those who accepted the position without any knowledge of macroeconomics and/or finance is downright frightening.

To be sure, they're characters. In most cases, their competence is beyond doubt. Four of them spent most of their careers in the Ministry of Finance. Medgyessy went through the pecking order, and even filled the position of deputy prime minister. Békesi had come from the local council apparatus to the ministry in the eighties, but soon became expert in macro-finances. Kupa and Bokros were acknowledged students of finance by the end of the seventies.

Which group of professionals should also include László Antal, the author of the preface, who modestly calls himself an old colleague, friend and sometimes advisor, but who is known by many to have been more: without him, none of the ministers of finance since the late sixties could have achieved what they did, and significant errors in economic policy have always been committed when his advice has been disregarded. ■



Alan Walker

# Of Pianists and Executioners

The Eleventh Ferenc Liszt International Piano Competition,  
Budapest, September 3 through 18, 2001.<sup>1</sup>

MUSIC

Between September 3 and 18, 2001, the Eleventh Ferenc Liszt International Piano Competition was held at the Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest. Sixty competitors from more than twenty countries descended on the city and vied with one another for a place in the sun.

Of all the piano competitions with which I have been associated, the Budapest Liszt Competition remains the one to which I am chiefly devoted. While it does not have the large prizes of the Van Cliburn Competition in Fort Worth or the Gina Bachauer Competition in Salt Lake City, it has something else that no other competition in the world can offer. Over the years, it has become part of Hungary's national pride, one of the jewels in the nation's crown. It has been well said that the Competition is just as much a symbol of Hungary as the Széchenyi Chain Bridge, or Tokaj wine. Hungarian Radio and Television carry its final stages to all parts of

the country (in fact, Hungarian Radio records the entire contest). And on the day that the winners are announced, the excitement seems to have an invigorating effect on the entire nation, not unlike the results of an international soccer match. North America mounts some very good piano competitions, but it has nothing to compare with this.

On the eve of the Competition, the secretary of the Jury, Beáta Schanda, arrived in the lobby of the hotel in order to rally the foreign jurors staying there and lead us the short distance down Teréz Boulevard towards the Liszt Academy for a meeting of the full jury. Its purpose was to acquaint us with the rules of the competition and to be given the opportunity to ask questions about the marking system. With one or two exceptions, my fellow-jurors were all well known to me: Rolf Dieter Arens from Germany; Marian Lapsansky from Slovakia; Sándor Falvai, Jenő Jandó, György Nádor and István Lantos (Chairman of the Jury) from Hungary; and Massimo Gon from Italy.

1 ■ Alan Walker has served on the juries of the past three Competitions—in 1991, 1996 and 2001. In this article he speaks only for himself.

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With all these colleagues I enjoyed a frictionless collaboration throughout the contest.

The main news to emerge was that of the 88 candidates who had registered, only 60 had turned up. This produced a general sigh of relief from around the conference table, for some of us had already started to wonder how we could possibly hear 88 half-hour recitals in the seven days set aside for the First Stage. Sixty was manageable, but only just. The task of the jury, so the rules informed us, was threefold: (a) to listen to the contestants; (b) to evaluate their artistic merit; and (c) to decide on their qualifications for the Semi-Final and Final stages of the competition, as well as make recommendations for the distribution of the prizes. From the opening field of 60 candidates, 12 would be sent forward to the Semi-Finals; and from those 12 a group of 6 would reach the Finals.

For many years now, the Liszt Competition has relied on a marking system that has served it well. Each candidate receives a mark ranging from 1 (low) to 25 (high). These marks are confidential; that is to say, they remain known only to the juror who awarded them. After each performance they are immediately placed in a strong box which is opened only after each round of the competition is concluded, and then only in the presence of the full jury. It is at these special junctures in the Competition that the entire jury becomes aware of the marks of the others. The lowest and highest marks are eliminated in order to remove the expression of prejudice, either for or against the candidate. The remaining marks are then averaged out. In brief, these numbers express the value placed on the candidates by the jury as a whole. This system has been criticized by other competitions that do not follow it, the argument being that it results in a "compromise candidate", someone who

offends no one. But the system has one supreme advantage not enjoyed by the others: by expressing judgements through numbers rather than through debate, it renders impossible the sort of confrontations among jury members that have come to characterize other competitions, and have indeed made them notorious. Once you start a discussion, those judges with powerful personalities will always dominate the ones who are weaker, and whose equally valid views will be flattened out of existence.

When anyone asks how one can possibly select a winner from sixty competitors, I remind them that this is a false question. For we are really dealing with three competitions, not one. Our first task is to send the best twelve forward to the Second Stage. I do not find that at all difficult. Twelve out of sixty gives one enormous latitude. Even the next step, that of sending the best six of those twelve to the Final Stage, is not insuperable. What I sometimes find very difficult is to select the best of those six, because at this high level we are dealing with differences in degree rather than differences in kind. I am constantly reminded of Voltaire's famous aphorism that the excellent always drives out the good. By extension, the sovereign always drives out the excellent. It is hard indeed to see both the good and the excellent driven out by the sovereign. The process is always more helpful for me if I keep asking myself: "Would I like to hear this candidate again?" If the answer is yes, my mark will always reflect that fact.

There is a mistaken notion about how, exactly, a juror arrives at his decision. Most people regard a juror as they might regard a cricket umpire, a boxing referee, or even a bank accountant. These officials know the rules, and it is their duty to keep a blow-by-blow account of every stage of the proceedings and punish the participants if



they flout them. The very word "juror" is unfortunate, since it carries with it a legal connotation, as if the concert hall had been turned into a court-room and we were taking evidence attempting to prove the guilt or innocence of the accused—in this case the unfortunate pianist. If he plays well, he may be let off with a warning; if he plays badly, he may get a life sentence, perhaps the death-penalty. The musical reader will see at once what is wrong with such analogies. Unlike a trial, in music you know what you are up against within the first two minutes. What follows is always a confirmation of first impressions. The sound, the phrasing, the articulation, the pedalling, and above all the musical mind behind them—these things manifest themselves at once. And if they do not, or if they turn up late, their absence can represent an Everest of an obstacle almost impossible to overcome. You do not get a second chance to make a first impression. The superior performer draws you into his world at once. I have never known there to be an exception to this idea. The task of the juror, then, is quite different from that of his counterpart in the court-room. He is not there to render a verdict; he is there to discover musical personality. Wrong notes, blurred pedalling, exaggerated tempi—all these things can be forgiven if personality is present. Of course, personality will never guarantee a winner; but it will not guarantee a loser either.

## II

And so to the pianists themselves. There was the usual variety of players on display: those who made love to the piano, and those who declared war on it; those who gave it their all, and those who took it back again. Some played with the detachment of a diplomat. (The correct definition of a diplomat, incidentally, is someone

who thinks twice before saying nothing, a state of affairs that applied to a number of the competitors). And the ranks of these players—the lover, the hater, the seducer, the diplomat—were occasionally infiltrated by that most undesirable arrival of all: the wood-chopper.

Among the common faults was the over-use of the agogic accent, employed not for expressive purpose but for technical convenience. I am referring to the habit of using that slight hesitation in time afforded by an agogic accent in order to make it easier for the player to get from point A to point B on the keyboard. Abused in this way, agogic accents became havens of refuge placed at strategic junctures along the keyboard, put there for the mundane purpose of giving the player a rest during a tiring journey. And all this under the umbrella of "expression". The practice is endemic among young pianists, and it amounts to a kind of deception.

Another fault was the approach to tremelandos, which abound in Liszt's music (they are totally absent in the music of Chopin and Schumann) and were generally played too slowly. Liszt always wanted them as fast as possible, irrespective of how they were notated. He recommended that they be played with the keys already halfway depressed (to shorten the journey towards the hammers) and he liked them played with a quiet arm. "Do not make omelettes", he would tell those of his pupils who put too much movement into the device. Enough omelettes were made on the platform of the Liszt Academy to open a restaurant, but occasionally someone walked onto the stage who knew exactly how to do it. One such pianist was Mamiko Tomari from Japan, whose enchanting account of *St. Francis of Assisi Preaching to the Birds* was a model of its kind. Alas, she did not get beyond the first stage.



There was, of course, the usual obsession with speed for its own sake.

"Why do you play it so fast?" Horowitz was once asked.

"Because I can", he replied.

In this simple altercation lies the death of so much of Liszt's piano music. The concert study *Gnomenreigen* suffered greatly throughout the competition from performances that went at breakneck speed. Liszt himself often complained that *Gnomenreigen* was nearly always played too fast for him. "There you go, mixing salad again", he would complain of students getting the crossed hands of the opening page into a tangle. There is a profound sense in which the slower you play this piece the more brilliant it can sound, because when you hear all the notes with diamond clarity, to say nothing of the spaces between them, they communicate the impression of swiftness. Everything is lost when these same notes are glued together into what Liszt described as "tone smearing".

Nor was there any shortage of pianists who wanted to be different for the sake of difference. It prompted one of my fellow jurors to observe drily that we will soon be giving prizes to pianists for playing normally. Certainly there was nothing normal about Liszt's wonderful concert study *Waldesrauschen* whose "forest murmurs" too often fell victim to hurricane-force winds which stripped the trees of all their leaves. Likewise the depiction of *St. Francis of Paula Walking on the Waters* produced occasional waves large enough to swamp the auditorium. We should not have to worry about taking to the lifeboats while listening to this piece. Of all the works subjected to distortion, however, *Wilde Jagd* probably fared the worst. The only pianist to rise above its formidable difficulties and communicate its underly-

ing sonata structure, was the gifted young Hungarian pianist Gábor Farkas. He is a musician of intelligence, a thinking man's pianist. Another piece that gave the candidates trouble was *Mazeppa*. Most of them could not rise above the turmoil of this music. After several such performances we felt sympathy only for the horse, and none at all for its riders, even the ones who remained seated on their steed, and one of whom gave the loudest execution of the piece that I have ever heard. A noble exception must be mentioned, however. The brilliant Ksenia Blinktsovskaya from Russia stunned me with her bravura performance of *Mazeppa*, which was illuminated from within by her shining insight into its structure. It was a source of bewilderment to me that this mature artist did not get beyond the first round.

Another Russian pianist, Lev Vinocour, whose playing in my opinion was marked by "difference for the sake of difference", got through to the finals. No one can begrudge him his success, although it was not a result of any mark that I gave him. He usually produced high-powered "competition performances", filled with tension, and exhibiting some occasional histrionics. He is already a fully developed artist, but his playing is not my cup of tea. There is a certain class of pianist, of whom Vladimir Horowitz was a leading representative, who search endlessly for inner voices, and then, having failed to find them, insist on bringing them out. Vinocour belongs to their ranks. His technique is astonishing, but he should abandon the search for non-existent hidden tunes, which all too often lead him into a musical *cul-de-sac*.

And what can one say of the 16-year-old Ingolf Wunder, the second youngest pianist in the competition? He played like a young lion, and lived up to both his name and his mane. His *Feux-follets* was



probably the fastest in the competition. And his *Erkönig* was phenomenal. Yet despite his prodigious talent he suffers from the vices of his virtues. His heart still rules his head and it sometimes leads him into a world of musical distortions. Meanwhile we forgive him (almost) everything, because of his youth. He did not reach the finals, but the jury awarded him the prestigious City of Budapest prize, to indicate both to him and to the audience (with whom he was a favourite) that his gifts had not gone unnoticed. We are bound to hear more of him in the coming years.

If there is one piece of general advice to be offered to all these talented young pianists it is this. Do not play fast and loose with Liszt or he will play fast and loose with you, exposing all your weaknesses. Remember the words of Artur Schnabel: "Interpretation is a free walk across firm ground." The walk may be free, but the ground beneath must be firm.

### III

**A**nd so a word about sound. There was often too much of it. The decibel level was sometimes overwhelming. Why are young pianists trained to produce a volume of sound designed to fill a concert hall of 3000 people? They will never need to use it, and most of them will be fortunate to play in modest halls of 300 people or less, for which their overwhelming sound is totally inappropriate. If only they knew that by scaling back their sound they could achieve exactly the same results—whatever the size of the hall! The distance between *mp* and *f* is exactly the same as the distance between *pp* and *mp*. Only the dynamic level has changed; the degree of contrast remains the same. All things are relative, after all. And when was the last time we heard a true pianissimo in the concert hall? Pianists seem afraid to go

there. Yet it can create an overwhelming effect when the audience has literally to lean forward in their seats in order to hear such murmurs of the heart.

This problem assumed general proportions halfway through the contest, when, after the First Stage, the Competition was transferred from the small recital hall to the Great Hall of the Academy, for by now the daily audience was beginning to swell in numbers. The recital hall holds about 300 people, the Great Hall about 1100. The Great Hall is wonderful for choirs, but not so good for pianos. Yet hardly any of the semi-finalists modified their approach, especially in their (over)use of the sustaining pedal. It was as if they were oblivious to their surroundings. The fact is that a pianist must not only play the piano but also "play the building". A hall, too, is a musical instrument, and its acoustic is there, waiting to be brought to life by the pianist's ten fingers. (Sir Adrian Boult once told me that he used to change the tempo of big works like Holst's "Planets" Suite, depending on whether he was conducting it in a dry concert hall, in Worcester Cathedral, or in the cavernous Royal Albert Hall.) The reverberation period can make or break a performance depending on whether or not you acknowledge its presence.

The answer to my earlier question: "When was the last time we heard a true pianissimo in the concert hall", was provided by the Canadian pianist Li Wang in his ravishing accounts of *La Leggerezza* and the Schubert/Liszt *Der Müller und der Bach*. He held the audience spellbound with these renderings which seemed at times to erase that invisible line separating sound from silence. Moreover, he was one of the few pianists to create that indefinable thing we call "atmosphere", in which the pianist encloses the audience within his magic circle, casts his spell, and draws them into his dreams.



Aside from *pianissimos*, there is another aspect of piano sound which we heard all-too-rarely. I am referring to *bel canto*. The "enthroned golden sound", as Busoni once put it, is almost entirely absent from the concert hall these days—and certainly from competitions. Its last great exponent may have been Shura Cherkassky, who passed away a few years ago. The simple truth is that inside every great pianist is a singer trying to get out. Embodied within this idea is the great paradox of the piano. Its sounds begin to decay the moment they are born; they are always on the point of death unless extraordinary measures are taken to keep them alive. The piano is a percussion instrument trying to sing, and for this reason it has been well described as an instrument of musical illusion. Players and composers alike throw out the baby with the bathwater if they simply treat it as a percussion instrument. Let them take up the drums. Of all the candidates we heard, it was the Croatian pianist Igor Spanjol who understood how to make the piano sing. His Schubert-Liszt *Ständchen* was ravishing, as was his *Aufenthalt*.

One other idea occurred to me as I listened to these young competitors, and it, too, has to do with sound. There is a long-held belief in the scientific community, shared by a number of musicians, that the quality of the piano's sound remains fixed to whatever dynamic level is produced. In brief, so the argument goes, the player has no independent control over quality, as opposed to quantity. According to this theory it makes no difference whatsoever whether the piano's keys are depressed by a human hand or by the point of an umbrella. This is not the place to give the pros and cons of the scientific principles involved, which are complex. Entire learned conferences have been devoted to the topic. Far better to attend a piano competition and watch one pianist after another play

on exactly the same Steinway grand piano and marvel at the variety of colour that emerges. All the scientific data in the world cannot argue away the evidence of one's ears. For the rest, the quality of sound is how a true artist—a Rachmaninov, a Cortot, a Horowitz—identifies himself. It is his musical fingerprint, and it makes him different from everyone else.

#### IV

**H**aving said all this, it would be churlish of me not to acknowledge the enormous pressure under which these young players must perform. They have been preparing their demanding programmes for the past two years. They are playing before a jury consisting in the main of international concert pianists (of whom I am not one) and subjecting themselves to the most stringent criticism. It is a daunting thing. Sometimes they left the platform visibly changed from the dream-driven artists they were when they sat down at the keyboard forty minutes earlier, shaken by the experience of having walked through flame and fire and lived to tell the tale. A metamorphosis of Lisztian proportions.

Some recitals were enlivened by a number of off-stage noises, including a couple of cell phones in the audience and a builder's drill in the road outside the hall, as well as the banging of hammers in the adjoining Library (there is much renovation going on at the Academy these days). But such things happen in the best of circumstances. The noises were soon silenced, and everyone took them in good humour—especially when it became evident that one of the cell phones was providing an intriguing counterpoint to the Schubert/Liszt song arrangement being played at that moment—in a rather desultory fashion, I should add. It cheered everyone up and transformed the piece.



Six performers were sent forward to the finals, including the very youngest competitor, Vadim Kholodenko from Ukraine. They had to play Liszt's pianistic masterpiece, the Sonata in B minor, and we heard all six of them in one day. The experience made me think about the old joke of too much Liszt making one "listless". On a much more serious level it also made one reflect on the enormous problems posed by this piece. Basically the Sonata requires a strategist, not a tactician. If these players had been generals and field-marschals instead of pianists, they might have won various battles with ease, but they would still have lost the war. The Sonata requires the "distant grasp", a performer who can direct the action with aristocratic detachment, not a foot-soldier who fights in the trenches. I have long held the belief that all the great performances of the Sonata last under 30 minutes, although there are some good ones that may last longer. From this point of view, it is the first half of the work that contains the most pitfalls. There is a temptation to linger over Liszt's filigree work, to dwell lovingly on his decorations, even to pause in order to "polish the ornaments", so to say, like some house-proud spouse awaiting a visitor. But one pays a very high price for such self-indulgence. It becomes difficult to redeem the second half of the Sonata because the clock is already running out, and one can never regain the lost time.

Here, for the record, are the timings of the finalists, courtesy of Hungarian Radio.

Massimo Motterle:	29'10"
Lev Vinocour	30'40"
Li Wang	32'15"
Gábor Farkas	28'30"
Vadim Kholodenko	28'50"
Péter Tóth	31'45"

It was Motterle's performance that most impressed me, and the rest of the ju-

ry, too, to judge by the high marks he was awarded. His interpretation possessed just the right amount of aristocratic detachment; and his refusal to become involved in all the local skirmishes that lie in wait for the unwary pianist, somewhat like ambushes along the way, strengthened his interpretation. Some of the other candidates fell victim to these passages, and suffered accordingly.

And so, on September 17, the jury retired to consider its verdict. One question that loomed large was whether to offer or to withhold the first prize. Juries have it within their power not to award any prizes at all, in order to "protect the integrity of the contest". After much deliberation a secret ballot was held, and a majority voted not to award a First Prize. I was very much against holding this ballot, and still more against the decision itself. In my view, the piano playing in this competition was in no way inferior to that of the competitions of 1991 and 1996, and first prizes were offered on both occasions. Anyone with the patience to go through the Hungarian Radio tapes of all three competitions could easily prove this for themselves.

Since there was no first prize winner, the money was divided among the three Third Prize Winners instead. The final distribution of prizes looked like this:

1st Prize:	\$6000	Redistributed
2nd Prize:	\$4000	Péter Tóth
3rd Prize:	\$3000	Massimo Motterle
	\$3000	Gábor Farkas
	\$3000	Vadim Kholodenko

With respect, the prize money is not enough. The top prize should be at least US\$10,000. Nowadays there is much competition among the competitions themselves. The Van Cliburn Competition, the Gina Bachauer, the Chopin in Warsaw, and even the Liszt Competition in Utrecht, all offer prizes greatly in excess of anything



seen in Budapest. The prizes should be higher not because money attracts better candidates (that will always remain an open question), but because it reveals the value that Hungary itself places on this historic contest. Ernő Dohnányi started the International Liszt Competition in 1933, and Annie Fischer was the first prize-winner. Since then there have been ten more Liszt Competitions, all of them landmark events in the musical life of the nation. The Competition continues to stimulate the appearance of one of Hungary's greatest exports: concert pianists. Hungarians have nearly always been among the finalists. That is a fine tribute to the legacy handed down by Dohnányi.

## V

Throughout the Competition a large picture of Franz Liszt was suspended above the stage, as if to give legitimacy to the proceedings. It depicts Liszt at about 73-years of age, his face is seamed with experience, he has seen and done everything in the world of piano playing. His head is turned slightly to the left, his eyes gazing upwards into the distance. Was it because he did not want to focus on the proceedings going on beneath him? I prefer to think that his faraway gaze symbolized his rapt attention to everything he was hearing, and that he was marvelling at what the young are now able to do both with, and to, his music.<sup>2</sup> ■

2 ■ The photograph was taken by the Weimar photographer Louis Held, in 1884.



András Nagy  
Malheur

Zoltán Román: *Gustav Mahler and Hungary*. Studies in Central and Eastern European Music 5. Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1991, 256 pp.

The superstitious Mahler had a foreboding whilst he was in Paris to conduct, at the height of his career (this was 1910), when he noticed a highly suggestive misprinting of his name on the French placards. His concert was anything but a success—Debussy bustled out of the auditorium during the second movement of the Second Symphony—and the next day's reviews were sniffy, finding the music "Germanic" and the otherwise auspicious encounter a—"malheur".

A flop in itself, of course, is no measure of value, even in Mahler's case, as the world can be mistaken in a multitude of ways; in its moments of clemency, public taste may surpass itself in being able to salute worthily one who is marching against the tide of the times, but this indicates, at best, that even in gaining recognition a genius has no way of orienting himself in the dreary parliamentarism of "democratic" taste. That, if anything, is almost harder to survive—that *malheur*, the fickle siren of success (and Mahler did have some), even though it offers neither its momentary favours nor eternal fidelity in keeping with genuine rank or merit.

That was a lesson Mahler too had to learn, right at the very beginning, and perhaps all the more memorably for that very reason, in the triumphs and failures that Budapest bestowed on him. From September 1888 to March 1891, Gustav Mahler was musical director of the Hungarian Royal Opera. He was twenty-eight when he was given the opportunity, which suggests the extraordinary confidence that was placed in him. Up till then, he had only had a chance to prove himself on the periphery of the Monarchy. Hall, Olmütz (Olomouc), Kassel, and even when he did make it to more prestigious places such as Laibach (Ljubljana), Prague, the engagements were "peripheral". Yet now came this invitation, this appointment, the promise to be given a "free hand" in directing the Opera House in Budapest, a chance at last to formulate a programme within a concrete framework.

The significance of this was further enhanced by Budapest becoming a venue where Mahler could introduce himself for the first time: specifically, with a symphony the "archaic" version of which has be-

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András Nagy

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come linked, in the decades since then, with the name of the Hungarian capital.

There is good reason to believe, then, that within a few years almost everything that might happen to a young musician in the "arrhythmically" expanding, provincial metropolis did happen—and he reacted with an "arrhythmia", human, artistic and officious, all of his own. This was, arguably, where the key chapter in this artist's *Bildungsroman* took shape.

Hence the welcomeness of a book that has, at long last, been written for a wider audience about this encounter in the uniquely motley world of the Habsburg Empire, about these formative years, decisive both for the (Moravo-Austro-Jewish) musician and the life of the (Hungarian) capital. The prospect that is offered, everything inherent in the situation and, at crucial moments, actually happens within the framework of an intellectual and a psychological *Bildungsroman*; this may seem like a benefit concert for music historians and scholars, whether it is a question of the dazzling opportunity offered to the young stranger; the leading and subsidiary figures of the intellectual Golden Age of *fin-de-siècle* Hungary (and the wider Austria-Hungary), who had a decisive role in the offer being made; the Mahler songs that rang out in Budapest; or of the composer's private family tragedies, which likewise befell him whilst he was there.

**Z**oltán Román has set about this task with a vast critical apparatus and disarming humility. He has supplemented ground-breaking archival research with a detailed study of contemporary press reports; identified the diverse (hitherto enigmatic) players and the trend-setter and interest groups that may be discerned behind them; reconstructed, virtually hour-by-hour, the activities and repertoire at the Opera during the "Mahler seasons"; sorted

out its financial balance sheet; corrected specious platitudes; replaced the soap opera of facile public opinion with the drama of the facts. He has uncovered and presented Mahler's correspondence with friends and colleagues, tracked down everything and everyone, from the most minor engaged singer to the foremost prima donna, in order that nothing be left out of the years that belong to the subject.

And that subject is *Gustav Mahler and Hungary*. Earlier memories too belonged to "the subject": the lonely time that Mahler spent, in the summer of 1879, as a piano teacher at Pusztabatta, the estate of Móric Baumgarten, some 20 kilometres south-west of Zalaegerszeg, as well as the returns to Budapest, both as a composer and, for brief visits, as a conductor, following the fall from directorship, come within the conscientious author's scope. And not content with dealing with the returns of the departed musician, Román also traces the fate of the "oeuvre" he left behind—the eventful sad history of the Opera House itself, which could not be completely undone even by the dilettantism of Géza Zichy's spell as Mahler's successor, any more than it could be restored under the later directorship of even an Arthur Nikisch.

In addition to archives, memoirs, collections of correspondence, concert programmes, and newspaper articles, Román has also digested the definitive Mahler biographies, above all that of Kurt and Herta Blaukopf, the Austrian couple who have had most influence in shaping public opinion (Román dedicated his own book to them), but also refers to Henry-Louis de La Grange, author of the definitive, huge work on Mahler and what is hitherto the most complete and accurate portrait of him, and is familiar with Tibor Gedeon and Miklós Mathé's earlier attempt (1965) to write up the story of Mahler's years in Hungary. A string of lesser Mahler biogra-



phies and music historical synopses also crop up amongst the references.

The young man who arrived in Budapest was remarkable for the ability he displayed, by dint of his intellect and talent, and his intransigence of will, virtually to redeem a Budapest Opera that had been struggling in grave crisis. And remarkable too—despite and because of all its internal contradictions—was the moment by whose grace, and later cruelty, Mahler created a success that was paradoxically embodied as failure.

Román reconstructs this rather brief era, along with the events leading up to it and its background, with persuasive care: all the hallmarks of scholarly meticulousness are evident on these pages. A host of people are convincingly identified on the basis of letters cited in the original and writings that were published either anonymously or with a by-line; dating problems are unambiguously resolved; parliamentary debates pondering the Opera's fate are presented in their full political context; a precise picture is given of the motives for, and effect of, decisions on programming policy; attention is even extended to such details as the challenge to a painful and compromising duel (the eloquent vengeance of uncooperative, humiliated musicians) and the contractual wrangles with world stars who were invited to Budapest, or the route of Mahler's planned flight, well before he was actually forced to take it. The documents and facts speak more tellingly than all. Only someone aware of the fateful power that chance and coincidence play in any large-scale life knows how important these minutiae are.

**W**hen Mahler was invited, still in his twenties, to take up the musical directorship of one of Europe's promising opera houses (and at an equally promising salary), the Hungarian parliament was in the midst of considering leasing out what

was still a brand-new building (it had opened its doors in September 1884). The Opera's debts were huge, and the politicians called upon to decide on its fate no longer saw any sense in it; its repertoire was outmoded, the public who patronized its glittering amphitheatre was primarily interested in social events.

Could it be that such an institution had no place, after all, on Andrásy (then Sugár, or Radial) Avenue? That the dream of Miklós Ybl, its architect, and of the handful of the intelligentsia who had believed in it, might be mistaken? That there was no demand for National Romanticism, at least in the form represented by the Erkel "dynasty" of composer-conductors of that previously traditionless Hungarian genre of opera writing, because their works no longer struck people as modern and were not even popular? Or was it all more an inescapable delusion of hope—and one should be all the bolder in hoping, because then the original premises might be redeemed after all? For that, however, there was a need for an indisputable talent, an obdurately incisive personality, with this as the "clean slate" for him to fulfil the hopes pinned on national institutions (and the country's greatness).

The invitation to Mahler, of all people, to take over at the Opera was one of the most brilliant coups of Hungarian liberalism, hanks to the resolve of Count Albert Apponyi, a cultivated aristocrat of broad intellectual vision, and his chosen partner, Ferenc Beniczky, the Opera's *Intendant*; the enthusiasm of the world-famous cellist, David Popper, with his acute "ear" for Hungarian musicians of European rank; the understanding of János Koessler, composition teacher at the Music Academy of the likes of Bartók, Kodály, Dohnányi and Léo Weiner; and the doggedness of Ödön Mihailovich, the Academy's director, who did more than anyone else to put it on the musical map.



Everything that ensued served to magnify, in almost exemplary fashion, the contradictions inherent in the decision and its circumstances. The artistic programme, with daring consistency, sought to be at once modern—promoting Wagner and later Mascagni as well—and national, with Hungarian works and performances sung in the Hungarian. Mahler aimed primarily at raising standards, albeit the personal and objective preconditions for doing so were not at hand. Within the institution whose redemption was sought, his cussedness and the desperately vaulting efforts of his artistic dictatorship continually came up against the retarding gravitational pull of “sloppy”, Erkel-style provincialism (“*Tradition ist Schlamperei*”, to borrow Mahler’s own despairing characterization). At the same time, the new director was seeking to place the institution on a sound financial footing and would have given up guest artists for home-grown stars had there been sufficient numbers of the latter available. Meanwhile, the lines of tension between artistic vision and Budapest realities built up ever more distressingly.

The revolutionary impact and enduring significance of Wagner’s *Ring* cycle was somewhat ambiguous on the boards of Budapest: the suspicions of an—at best—only partially receptive public towards the “pan-Germanic” (or Austrian or Jewish) Mahler on occasion eclipsed recognition of his introduction of modern musical drama. The director, adopting a Hungarianized spelling, often signed his letters “*Gusztáv*” and was keen to strengthen the national character of the institution: his enthusiastically nationalist programme remained—astonishingly—rhetoric, sadly unimplemented. For what was there to implement? Where were the classics of contemporary Hungarian opera? But then, should he take works into the repertoire merely because that was what he had

promised, if these were weak and totally at odds with his standards?

The web of links between policy, as one manifestation of intellectual and social legitimacies, and the fate of the Opera, as the social model of artistic and intellectual legitimacies, that gradually emerges—a web in which well-wishers and liberals, innovators and ingenues, politicians and artists alike were to become entangled, sooner or later—is astounding. The room for manoeuvre that the national tradition—as projected in the direction of the Opera—demarcated, and that Mahler, in his own way, tried to alter, is delineated with startling starkness. All the same, it was limitations of personality (a style of leadership that brooked no contradiction), the unredeemed promises (the substitution of guest artists by domestic talent), the ever more extreme reactions of the public, and of course the slow turn of history that had the final word. It also required that the new régime, initiated with the downfall of the Tisza government, in March 1890, set a seal on the short-lived illusion of that Golden Age for the extremist horsemen to come riding in, the historical graves to open up, and for buried forms of consciousness start their St Vitus’s dance, lest some sort of Europeanness or modernity dare hold back the region’s manifest destiny. And that too is accurately registered, albeit not explicitly expounded, in this story, in the way the unredeemed programme and the redeemed opportunities alike served as reasons for removing Mahler. There can be no doubting his talent, any more than the validity of his contract; he had the intellectual élite behind him, but *naturally* none of this counted once Géza Zichy, a conservative, authoritarian, aristocratic dilettante, arrives on the scene in the tail-wind of the new politics in order that, through his victory, the musician be not just replaced but



humiliated and discredited as publicly and painfully as possible.

All this can be read in the book, for the book aims to provide as faithful a documentation as is feasible of precisely these events. It can be read, but this it not the *reading* that is presented, for the reader is left with a sense that the author sees the essential point but by chance skirts it. We wait in vain for emphasis to be placed on the successive turning points that slip by, for the leavening of a mundane earthing of ideas and attitudes, for some essayistic boldness. It is as if the superabundant, almost homogenizing force of facts and details were getting the better of what, ultimately, creates hierarchy in a life and in an oeuvre.

**T**he subject of Zoltán Román's book is a director, an Imperial and Royal administrator, whereas it ought to have presented an unkempt and ill-mannered young man—and, not least, one of the unhappy geniuses of modern music. Against the indisputable documents of the signing of contracts, premières set and postponed, press polemics and parliamentary minutes, a Christmas spent in solitude, the untraceable and always hurried rambles in the hilly Buda suburb of Hűvösvölgy, or the coat button that Mari Jászai, the greatest actress of the time, sewed back on would have offered evidence had they been cited. We are able to follow the political decisions, to learn about events in the Opera and its milieu, that is true—only the motives, sadly, are left in the obscurity that scholarly honesty demands. How can inscrutable psychological mechanisms be translated into the language of data? As a result, the impact—the real and enduring impact—is likewise left in the shade: reviews, ticket sales and parliamentary debates can but hint at the fugitive and intangible creature that, in the end, everything else was supposed to be serving.

That creature was nothing less than music. Not just the operas that were performed, chosen for premiering, and found success or met failure, but the music that was given birth to here and by this means. The music through which one might, perhaps, gain an inkling into what was actually and crucially happening to Mahler himself; not just the administrator, target for caricature, the unaccommodating colleague, but the genius at the mercy of his sensitivity, who reacts more durably—and, let's face it, ultimately more validly—than any number of written petitions and directives.

Those few years in Budapest, arguably, constituted the most crucial—because initial—phase of Mahler's symphony-composing period. Not just on account of the first performance of his First Symphony but because numerous motifs and themes of the Second Symphony also stem from this time. Besides the facts about the First Symphony's first performance and its partially documented reception, maybe one should also be told, or at least gain an insight into what was happening *inside* the man. That, of course, can only be deduced and imagined; it is not readily measurable and still less documentable—these things were all to come into being later on but, would be, after all, the supreme token of Mahler's musical identity. We might then at least remain close to essential questions.

Sadly, however, we don't. Whilst the volume parades a dazzling bounty of hitherto unpublished letters (at length, in German, with a sound translation into English given in footnotes) concerning the terribly important matter of the Opera House's management, reviews, polemical articles, minutes, and so forth, it's as if the composer's inner struggles were hopelessly stranded on some shore outside its covers. Does that than mean that *Gustav Mahler and Hungary* contains no clear connection with the truly important—one might say immortal—side



of the musician? To be more specific, with the genius; after all, Mahler did not only leave his epochal mark as a conductor or an artistic leader but through the overarching experiments of his orchestral style, his heroic documentation of the disintegration of the musical idiom of western Europe, and alongside all that, through his inexhaustible compositional power, for which the sprawling extent was just one—indirect—metaphor.

Life, too, might be said to have been somewhat left out of the book. Of course, a self-respecting scholar cannot be asked to know the flavour of a cappuccino at the Dreschler coffee-house, the smell of the Tigris Hotel, the erotic registers of ever-attractive sopranos. But if these are bound to remain beyond the purview of a rigorous scholar's consideration, then at least family tragedies—loss of his parents and the worry about having to provide for the upbringing of his siblings, his increasingly insupportable loneliness, his own incipient illness—had a decisive impact on Mahler's life in Hungary. That ought to be the book's proper realm, not the profile of the official or the copious documentation of his conduct of managerial affairs, which are but a superficial topography of the activities of a vast spirit.

If a well-primed, conscientious author, mobilizing such a vast pile of data, is unable to leap over the shadow of his genre, it is as if he were looking on reality as a synonym rather than merely a projection—and one of dubious trustworthiness at that—of the documents. Of course, a great many key moments for the Opera in Pest are outlined on the pages of the book, but we have to traverse a vast—and barren—tract in order to reach them, and in all truth without a guide, for to the publisher of data every document is important in its own right.

The book may well become a source, one that, in all likelihood, will be indispensable for anyone concerned with the minuti-

ae of Mahler's life-work; for those who want an accurate account, say, of how the Opera House's repertoire evolved, between desires and opportunities, in its first Golden Age; for those curious about the hermeneutics of concert-going in Pest as the 1880s moved into the 1890s. That sort of thing. It may also contain important pages even for those who consider these Budapest years as constituting a *prelude* to everything that closes, like a trap, around the musical genius later on in Vienna and New York, as a product of his own personality, on the one hand, and the artistic and social radicalism that so readily becomes stigmatized in such a creature, on the other.

For everything that befalls him in Budapest is paradigmatic. Both in the extraordinary possibility and in the impossibility of implementing it. In the "duality" which already then characterized a country that was both boldly modern in turning towards Europe and proudly provincial in turning in on itself. And in that "duality" which characterized the young man's personality: the consistent artistic rebel, but one who sought to wage that rebellion within the framework of a social institution.

These things can only be dimly inferred from the book. The author, inherently cautious of generalities, forward or backward looks, intellectual flights of any sort, is disinclined to make any selection. But, in the end, this in itself becomes a form of selection, because Román treats the mute turning points, the crises that can only be traced by the application of imagination, the concealed or even withheld sources, as non-existent.

What does exist or, to be more precise, comes into being on the book's pages, that, in itself, is not really Mahler. Faithful, accurate, detailed, of ground-breaking importance, and—yes—indisputably authentic, but with no connection to the truth of art, or the layers of fate. Yet that, perhaps, is the wellspring of it all. ■



Tamás Koltai

## Old Stories, New Stories

Géza Bereményi: *Shakespeare királynője* (Shakespeare's Queen) • Béla Balázs: *A kékszakállú herceg vára* (Duke Bluebeard's Castle) • Menyhért Lengyel: *A csodálatos mandarin* (The Miraculous Mandarin) • János Háy: *A Gézagyerek* (The Géza Kid) • Zoltán Egressy: *Kék, kék, kék* (Blue, Blue, Blue)

THEATRE & FILM

The acclaimed novelist, playwright and film director Géza Bereményi has now taken on an old but well-known story. *Shakespeare's Queen* is concerned with the relations between the playwright and Queen Elisabeth I, and with the intrigues in politics and the theatre at that time. The play's idea arose from a strange situation. Bereményi has for years been working on the most ambitious and most expensive Hungarian movie ever produced, *Hidember* (Bridge Man). It is about Count István Széchenyi, the great 19th-century reformer. Széchenyi wrote important books on economics, founded the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, introduced horse racing to Hungary, established regular boat services on the Danube and initiated the construction of the first permanent bridge across the Danube in Budapest, to mention but a few of his ventures. The film, budgeted at the unprecedented sum in Hungary of 2 billion forints, was scheduled for showing in the spring of 2002, but financing problems and many other delays have set this back. Bereményi sat down to write *Shakespeare's Queen* in one of these interludes, completing it within a couple of weeks.

The author introduces the play: "The erotically charged relations between Queen Elisabeth and her favourite, the Earl of Essex, form the focal point of the events. Among those appearing in the play are Francis Bacon, a marvellous philosopher and essayist but a hopeless politician, and Ben Jonson, the playwright whose literary career was launched by Shakespeare, and who once served a prison sentence for duelling." Other characters include Walter Cecil, the chief Secretary of State, Edmund Tilney, the Master of the Revels (in fact, the chief censor), Burbage, the famous actor, a number of Globe Theatre shareholders and; of course, Shakespeare himself. Essex, who fell out of favour with the queen after his disastrous Irish campaign, tried to raise the populace of London in revolt against her. On the day of the plot—and this is historical fact—the Globe Theatre performed *Richard II*, a play in which a king, who was said to be Elisabeth's ancestor, is forced to abdicate. In Bereményi's version it is Essex who hit on the idea of stirring up trouble in the City by persuading the Globe to put on a special performance of *Richard II* on

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that day. After the revolt was crushed, Shakespeare was hard put to extricate himself, all the more so as he had had several brushes with Tilney in the past, often getting the worst of them. Bereményi's Shakespeare loathes politics; he joins no faction, his only ambition is to persevere in the pursuit of wealth through the stage. He subordinates everything to this goal; he suppresses his love and risks his artistic freedom. After Elisabeth's death he tries to win King James I's favour: one scene shows these two jointly "invent" Shakespeare's Scottish play, *Macbeth*. In the last scene we see the retired dramatist on the day of his death, far removed from the fancies of both politics and art.

Bereményi emphasizes that his play is "a historical drama, which takes place in Shakespeare's times; it is completely authentic, and yet it happens today." This is a clear reference to his own position. Bereményi makes no bones about the play being inspired by the situation in which he found himself after he had taken on the direction of *Hídember*. He was independent as a writer and director until he realized that there was no way to complete this film without substantial state financing. He accepted its preferences and thus found himself up against Hungary's entire movie profession. The latter resented that *Hídember* had received state subsidies many times the amount that would have allowed several dozen films awaiting completion to be brought to the screen. Parliament has passed no Cinema Law, the professional body that represents Hungarian film-makers could not therefore reach an agreement with the Ministry of Culture on the financing of films. Since the professional advisory boards do not function, the distribution of funds is carried out ad hoc. In an interview Bereményi spoke frankly about the compromises he had been forced to make to be able to finish the film: compro-

mises that made him feel privileged and defenceless at the same time. You might say that writing *Shakespeare's Queen* was his way of handling this conflict of conscience. It is the predicament of being torn between political commitment and conscience. It would be an exaggeration to suggest that Bereményi substituted himself for Shakespeare, but through the latter's characters Bereményi tried to understand the position of a creative man manoeuvring between opportunities and constraints.

The play is text-centric and open. It does not pass judgement; instead, it allows the audience to form a verdict. But that requires intellectually complex acting. The production by the Hevesi Sándor Theatre of Zalaegerszeg (where Bereményi is artistic director) only partially succeeded in meeting that challenge. It lays great emphasis on the visual, on the colourful (and occasionally grotesque) presentation of court protocol and etiquette, while leaving human dramas unexplored. The historical characters are not powerful enough—with the exception of Essex and the Queen—and as to Shakespeare's character, the will or the courage to present the radical side of his personality was missing. We do not see the man of exceptional intellect, erudition and artistic sensibility, who stands head and shoulders above the others, and who has his own view about everything but in the interest of "survival" is forced to act shrewdly, making compromises and even abasing himself—thus inducing a conflict of conscience. The play's Shakespeare is too plain. Perhaps this is why the director, in the last scene, instead of drawing the obvious, bitter conclusion, apotheosizes the Swan of Avon. The dead poet is laid out centre stage, with light effects and hundreds of manuscript pages showering on him from the sky. Even if we were inclined to be moved by Shakespeare's fate



(there is no apparent reason why we should be), Bereményi's leaves us untouched.

The stories of *The Miraculous Mandarin* and *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* are known only in the composer Béla Bartók's versions. Less has been said about those who wrote the libretti, Menyhért Lengyel and Béla Balázs, both Hungarian writers of note in the first half of the 20th century. The former earned a reputation outside Hungary as a successful playwright and screenwriter, (author of the script of *Ninotschka*), the latter's contributions (in Hungarian and German) to the theory of film resulted in some key works in the literature of aesthetics. But what happens when the plays lose Bartók's music? Because this is exactly what has happened.

*Duke Bluebeard's Castle* is the simpler case. A director has decided—not for the first time—to stage-produce the libretto without the music. Beatrice Bleon, a former ballet dancer, now a stage director, who has already directed several interesting avant-garde productions in Hungary, chose a majestic open-air venue, the Gothic ruins of the Zsámbék monastery near Budapest, for her latest production, obviously under the spell of the location itself. The atmosphere is spooky; wearing an evening dress, Judith comes down on squealing wooden stairs and the close-cropped Bluebeard has Draculean airs in escorting his victim to the spider-webbed castle. A candelabra stands on the velvet-covered piano, while a dreamlike chorus of ballet dancers dance to *Für Elise*. Unaided by Bartók's music, Bluebeard's Art-Nouveau-style words, heavy with alliteration, inform us of the battle of the sexes in Hungarian verse, along Freudian lines. Bartók's genius happily cloaks the text (non-Hungarian speakers would not understand it anyway, and, believe me, they

are none the worse for it.) Only Bluebeard speaks in the performance, save an old witch-doctor woman who adds sarcastic commentary to his words. Béla Balázs was frequently accused of male chauvinism, and here the charge seems justified. Finally, Judith makes up her mind to flee, but Duke Bluebeard's former mistresses enwrap her in veils, relegate her to oblivion. It is best if we do the same with the entire production.

The de-Bartóking of *The Miraculous Mandarin* is a much more complicated story. Originally, the première of Csaba Horváth's choreography in the production of Közép-Európa Táncszínház (Central European Dance Theatre) in Budapest was still "normal". The choreographer himself appeared in the Mandarin's role, and the Girl's part was performed by the exceptionally talented Andrea Ladányi. A minor scandal broke out on the first night, when two spectators stood up, shouted "What has Bartók got to do with this?" and stormed out. This in itself is not unheard of—it can happen to any production—but then Bartók's heirs also intervened, stopping the show through their legal representatives. This, too, has already been known to happen with *The Miraculous Mandarin*. The ballet's world première was also banned, by the then mayor of Cologne. His name was Konrad Adenauer, and he went on to become Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany after the Second World War. The ballet could not be performed during the fifties in Hungary, either. On both occasions the excuse of "moral reasons" was given. Time and again, Menyhért Lengyel's story about the undying lust of the Mandarin, who can find peace in death only after his union with the prostitute Girl, is declared "immoral" by some administrators. By taking legal action, the composer's son, Péter Bartók, has also sided with prudery, re-



ardless of the claim he has made about the director/choreographer subverting the spirit of the original work. This is obviously an excuse. In past decades there have been numerous adaptations of *The Mandarin*, which strayed from Menyhért Lengyel's libretto even further. (In one case, for example, the Girl gave birth to the Mandarin, so as to protect her from the evil world). Péter Bartók raised no objections then. It is true that in the moments of ecstasy and union in death the dancers have no clothes on, and even worse than that, before the climax half a dozen crying infants are brought on stage in cages, and for the duration of the two minutes they are kept there, the music stops.

This, like any concept, is open to debate, naturally. But police intervention based on phoney humanistic moralization cannot be used to resolve the issue. The history of the visual arts is a history of interpretations; the major works are intellectual offerings, which every age reinterprets. The Közép-Európa Táncszínház found the only possible method of registering protest: it continues the production without Bartók's music, calling it *The Mandarin*. The silent pantomime enhances the music of the bodies, the punches, the thumps, the muffled screams, the heavy breathing. The physiology of sighs, moans and breathing is given aesthetic meaning here. The performance takes place in an empty space, a sandy desert, with the cheap props of the consumer society: supermarket trolleys, battered refrigerators, and plastic screens. The Girl's skeletal body, close-cropped hair, her hectic gestures and the horrified look of a hunted animal bear witness to the scandal of the 20th century: the deprived, humiliated and exploited human species. The starting point itself also seems the end. The existence of the Mandarin opens a new, supernatural dimension. The choreography wa-

vers between vulgar realism and poetic stylization. The violence represented by the tramps culminates when the Mandarin's naked body is smeared with tar. Curling up as if she were a baby, the Girl takes a bath in a supermarket trolley converted into a bathtub. Next we see the Girl emerge from her infantile condition and reborn in the manner of a phoenix. She peels off the Mandarin's encasing of tar and the two naked bodies bury themselves while performing their union right to the final spasms. Through an inner ear one can hear Bartók's music, if one wants to.

**A**nother well-exploited story is that of the autistic man who has a broader grasp of the world than we, the able-bodied do. The list runs from Dostoyevsky's idiot right down to Rainman. The forty-year-old poet János Háty's first play, *Gézagyerek* (The Géza Kid), was meant to be the latest addition to this list. The play is about a twenty-five-year-old retarded youth, who lives in an unnamed village with his mother. He has an open mind, he is keen to understand the world. All the more so when he finds a job in a nearby quarry. The foreign owner, the "German", is worried about accidents (or rather, about the costs of accidents), so he needs somebody to watch the conveyor belt and stop it with the push of a button if something goes wrong. Géza is cut out for the job. Even someone like him can do this; others won't, because the "German" pays peanuts. This is how the Géza Kid becomes the Stone-Watcher, or Géza Stone-Watcher, as he likes to call himself. He sits high up on a discarded bus-seat, with the airs of a King or a God, the master of life and death.

The only problem is that nothing ever happens, and after a while the Géza Kid begins to feel that this is no work at all, and that it is perfectly pointless for him to be sitting high up day in, day out, if he



never has to push the button. He does not understand why he has to sit there. As to the others, they don't understand what it is that he doesn't understand. Would he feel better, if he had reason to push the button, if one of them was lying in a pool of blood on the conveyer belt? Why should this Géza Kid be such a smartass? But Géza goes on being so, and so the others decide to play a prank on him. They place a dog's corpse on the belt, pretending it is Uncle Lajos' body, and the Géza Kid stops the belt just as he has been instructed to do. He cannot be faulted for Uncle Lajos' death, because although he did want to push the button, he did not want Uncle Lajos to die. That had nothing to do with him, he had to die independently of his inkling to push the button, he is dead and that's that. When it turns out that he is not dead after all, it proves just too much for the Géza Kid to handle. Somewhere along the line something must have gone wrong. But no one can say what it was and where it happened and nobody can remedy the problem, with the exception of the Almighty, perhaps. And Géza never goes to work again.

Háy's play vividly illustrates how the autistic boy, the "mentally challenged", can be the only one to take an interest in transcendence and ontological existence, the only one to search for causality in the world; the others are quite content to vegetate in a small world bounded by mindless work and the pub. The dramaturgical structure itself is built around the everyday routine; the short scenes alternate in the same circular sequence: the kitchen, the grocery shop, the bus stop, on board the bus, the quarry, the pub, and the neighbour's garden fence which the Géza Kid passes every day. Rapid scenes, sparse dialogue. Language is the most important means of characterization in the play. Háy has a peculiar talent to create a homoge-

neous language for all the characters, but within the same linguistic idiom the central character's manner of speech remains different from that of the others. Géza's speech—with its elements linked in a chain-like manner—is a system of associations repeated in various "modules", creating an elevated, and in some sense poetic, stylization, regardless of its monotony. In the case of the others, the same linguistic mechanics produces only empty clichés, while the fire cracks of vulgarity, although getting a few laughs, fail to produce any naturalistic effect due to the stylization and the compaction. In this way characterization acquires diversity; instead of the conflict between the primitive, unsympathetic mass and a victim who deserves a better fate, what we see here is a kind of "collective autism". We witness the monotony of eventless lives, which one character sums up with the phrase: "Otherwise nothing happened yesterday." Staleness of lifestyles and a dismal quality of life hamper all efforts at genuine communication between people. The well-meaning, indifferent and primitive individuals who represent the village population in the play adequately mirror the social problems of contemporary Hungary. In fact in this sense, Háy, in his own bashful way, has written a socio-drama.

István Pinczés directed the chamber piece at the Csokonai Theatre of Debrecen. He chose a rather original way of cramming the numerous scenes into the narrow confines of the stage. Outside the basic space, which is the kitchen of Géza's family, he arranged three boxes in the back. These can open and close in the manner of a camera shutter, revealing the actual scene. The stage set is strongly stylized, merely indicating the necessary props. The almost static scenes against a white background and with a black margin give the impression of blown-up photos.



Some of the "socio-photos" are surrealist; thus, we listen to Géza's monologues while he is lying upside down on a tilted bed. The world is out of joint, but the attempt to come up with an interpretation might make us believe that our existence still has some vague purpose.

**B**lue, Blue, Blue, the third work by an equally young playwright, Zoltán Egressy, is bound up with the old familiar iconographical elements of the world of the circus—vulgarity, illusion, cheap glamour, slapstick rhymes, clownery and melodrama. The Filadelfia (sic!) Travelling Circus is a makeshift family enterprise, barely surviving from day to day, hampered by a shortage of money and the deaths of the animals, and strained by family conflicts. An unexpected offer could blast them out of their lethargy: they are invited to apply for membership of the international body, World Circus (WC), which holds out prospects of wealth, foreign tours and general prosperity. All they have to do is bribe the organization's representative in Hungary. But they bungle it, and everything remains as it was.

From Watteau to Fellini, artists have used the circus as a metaphor for art. The clown is the artist's self-portrait. In Egressy's case, however, this is not so. To quote one of Egressy's characters, "this is not what the story is about." Rather, it is about the dream hovering in front of us. About membership at the World Circus, WC for short, about "joining Europe", or at least its Central-European sub-division. It is true that the company is not much of a circus, with only one of its members being a qualified circus artiste, but he is suitably ambitious and arrogant. Anyway, it is not the quality of performance that counts, as long as there is somebody whom we can bribe. And we have never been short of those.

The story is allegorical and self-ironic with regard to Hungary's accession to the European Union. But the allegory will only function if the story can stand on its feet. The characters in *Blue, Blue, Blue* have no stories. They are literary fictions. There is a great deal that we know about them, and much more that we only suspect—things like illegitimate children begotten by various fathers, the probable illness of the head of the family, the grandmother's adventures in America, an oversexed girl. However, these splinters of characters can never combine into human fates. The clever dialogue results from the director's dramatic aptitude, rather than his urge to communicate. Perhaps the characters speak so much because they have very little to say. At least thirty minutes of dialogue could be cut without any loss. On the other hand, what are absent from the performance are those face-to-face situations in which something actually happens; Egressy is needlessly economic here. One such situation could have been the attempted bribe, another one could have been the discovery, in the middle of the show, of a medical report as evidence of the director's fatal illness. (The former has potentials for grotesque humour, the latter could have added to the drama.)

The play puts the actors in a difficult spot. It is easier to create a milieu than to produce a compact drama. The designer has pitched up a battered tent over the authentic circus ring, but the long circus scene, which should simultaneously have demonstrated the actors' relative adroitness and the professional circus artists' absolute degeneration, is the weak point of the production. Only professionals could have acted amateurism. In that way we could have recognized ourselves, and the allegory could have functioned. The old story could have transformed into a new one. ■



Erzsébet Bori

## Early Sorrow

Árpád Sopsits: *Torzók* (Abandoned).

The heroes of *Torzók* (Abandoned) are boys of six to eleven, who live in a children's home in the country. The main character is Áron Soproni, aged nine. The film narrates the fate, friendship, physical and mental development, sexual awakening of seven children: they are the "gang," sticking together through thick and thin. Christmas comes, and when all the others can go home, they have to stay in the institution. This is when they decide to escape, an attempt that ends in tragedy; one of them dies, another is hospitalized, the gang is dispersed, Áron is sent to an even stricter institution. The events take place somewhere in the very east of Hungary in 1960.

Abandoned and institutionalized children in the late fifties: a parable, certainly a model of the society out there. An abandoned, lonely country, forced to its knees, locked up, punished, shoved down the trapdoor of history. To keep its bloody mouth shut is what its oppressor expects it to do—as does the world, fearful for the *status quo*.

These boys in the home were born at the wrong time in the wrong place. What makes it more difficult for Áron and his

friends is that they were not wrung from their families as babies or in their early childhood, and this makes them more vulnerable to the severe atmosphere of the institution, its militant discipline. Most of the children in *Abandoned* are the victims of the retaliations that came in the aftermath of the 1956 Revolution. Their parents are dead, are in prison, or have fled the country, or have lost their jobs, their homes, or are divorced as a consequence of poverty and despair.

Áron's father cannot or will not provide for him, and hands him over to the care of the state. His mother is in hospital, may go blind soon. The film opens with a motto from a poem by Nietzsche: "Who lost as much as you have, has no rest. Soon it will be snowing, woe to him who has no home." And Áron is a restless, fleeing child: his finest memory, given in full colour among those dark, sombre pictures, is his flying a kite with his father and sister (only later do we find that the minuscule female is not his sister but his mother); the kite is picked up by the wind, the boy runs, follows it, until he himself takes off, soars, first on the wings of the kite, then on his own.

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Newcomers in the institution are subjected to a proper interrogation, brutal initiation ceremonies, before they can start settling in; a long process, at the end of which seven of the boys find themselves united in friendship, in their own gang. Meanwhile their socialist education proceeds, with none too varied means: punishments including severe chastisement, rare and always pedagogically motivated rewards, promises, blackmail, intimidation and manipulation, everything short of outright threats. The letters they are regularly coerced to write (which are censored) are used to get information on the parents, though, to be on the safe side, teachers also use informants.

Shortly before the Christmas holiday, Áron smashes a window with a snowball. The punishment meted out is meant to steel the body, strengthen willpower and enhance community feeling: he has to tow a case full of coal and not one piece is to fall out. Only if he manages this can the children go home for Christmas. The task is impossible, Áron can hardly move the overbrimming case, drags it millimetre by millimetre, picks up fallen coal pieces when the teacher turns his back, and by the time he finishes, his palm is raw. As a reward, all those can go on holiday who would have gone in any case, and all those who have nowhere to go stay: Áron and the gang. At Christmas somebody informs on Máté, who, despite all threats and retributions, prays, with the eagerness and fanaticism of the first Christians. Those friends of his who try to defend him are forced to cane him. This is the last straw, the boys decide to break out. They set out in the depth of winter, over unknown terrain, ignorant of the whereabouts of home. For two days they can evade their pursuers, but on the second night they come to the frozen River Tisza. The ice breaks, Attila sinks, and Máté, who comes to the

rescue, slips in the hole too. Áron can save only one of them. A chillingly realistic and perfectly organized scene, charged with emotions: anxiety, courage, cowardice, despair. Attila's death and Máté's pneumonia mean the end of the enterprise: Áron as ringleader travels third class to an even worse institution, after he has been told to consider himself a murderer for the rest of his life.

"**H**ungary, 1960" reads the caption after the credits of *Abandoned*. But Árpád Sopsits's film takes place in what Hungarians regard as the fifties. The sixties in Hungary started only in 1963, when a general amnesty was declared on April 4—Liberation Day, the most important national holiday, beside November 7, until 1989—and what later became called the Kádár era started functioning. In 1960 prisons were still full of those convicted after 1956 and the political prisoners of earlier times, the Hungarian issue was still debated in the UN, and American stevedores refused to handle the luggage of First Secretary Kádár and his delegation arriving for the General Assembly. To be sure, some were given amnesty in 1960, like the writer Tibor Déry and the politician Ferenc Donáth, thanks to international pressure, or those incarcerated before 1953 and having spent more than ten years in prison, as well as the "short-timers" of 1956, whose sentences were shorter than six years. But this was also the time when the leaders of the infamous political police were released, Mihály Farkas, Vladimir Farkas (his son) and Gábor Péter, who had a key role in show trials and in the death and torturing of hundreds of people. The limited show amnesty led to a mutiny in the Vác prison, those in power prepared for a new conspiracy trial, interior defence tirelessly sought the enemies of the state, and the



machinery of retaliation was vigorously at work: if death sentences were no longer the rule, it was still easy to get thirteen years for "instigation" and "conspiracy."

The director of the institution (Tamás Fodor) is an embodiment of "the socialist type of man": a rat, conditioned in the fifties, who will act along the rules imbibed right up to the eighties. Even though as early as 1960 he no longer knows what in fact is to be dreaded or lost in that completely unimportant institution in the back of beyond. The other two members of the teaching staff are also typical figures, Csapó, the bad teacher, and Nyitrai, the good one. Csapó—who could have been a priest-teacher in the previous regime—is cruel on principle, out of the conviction that the soft methods of his colleague are unsuitable for preparing the children for the grimness of the outside world. I don't know how a man can be a paedophile and a sadist at the same time, fortunately the actor Pál Mácsai is not puzzled by this contradiction. Nyitrai (László Gálffi) himself is there in the institution as a punishment: a former astronomer, he was sent to prison, estranged from his family, and on his release was given another chance by the people's regime. He introduces Áron to the mystery of constellations, it is with his telescope and astral map the boy discovers Andromeda, the Big Bear, the Evening Star. Nyitrai cannot accept his fate, after the tragic escape of the boys he commits suicide.

Want of motherly love and the first pre-adolescent desires drive all the boys to Marika (Dóra Létay), the only female staff member, who tries desperately to withstand their siege. She is still young and beautiful, but her tired face and haunted look, just as her clandestine and joyless affair with the director, predict an early withering.

Another thing to the credit of Sopsits, apart from casting the actors listed above,

is his finding the boys. Casting is said to have taken years, the fifty inmates, including the seven-strong gang, were selected from more than 100,000 boys. The size of the teaching staff was an enforced compromise due to insufficient funds. But when it came to the children, Sopsits was resolute. He knew they would make the film authentic, they would carry it on their backs. And they do.

Árpád Sopsits wrote the script himself, out of his own life. This is his fourth feature film. His 1990 *Céllövölde* (Shooting Gallery) revealed a strong talent, and if *Videoblues* (Video Blues) and *Derengő* (Lost Leading Man) were less forceful or disappointing, the maturity and assured formal solutions of *Abandoned* surprised few. What is perhaps an interesting question is why he kept in reserve this (auto-biographical) topic for ten years, when it is customary to start a film career with such.

Among the objects creating recurring motives in the film (map, meteorite), a children's roundabout gains special significance. It indicates the passing of time, it connects the episodes that make up the film, it allows passages from reality into fantasy. It also denotes the period, while swings or see-saws have retained their popularity, roundabouts have long disappeared from playgrounds. The one in the film stands in the yard of the institution, its paint peeling, creaking mercilessly. Áron gets to know it the first day, since the children use it as an instrument of torture: make him sit in it and whirl him round until he is sick. Later he uses it to orient himself, while exploring the sky on clear nights with Nyitrai's map. But it also serves as the round table of the gang, this is where they hatch their escape plan, this is what Áron sees from the barred window of his cell, and its creaking is what accompanies his nightmarish vision of dead Attila riding it.



It is as if Sopsits accomplished his Copernican revolution with this roundabout. He discovered that this object, tied to reality and a period, can carry more than the most sophisticated theoretical construction and contains denser meanings than intricate symbols. On screen the roundabout is inescapably concrete, which can be considered either a blessing or a curse, but cannot be ignored. Only after depart from the naked sight of the object can we turn towards the metaphor. And how rarely is such a departure successful...

Sopsits shoots his own gloomy scripts and is attracted by extreme situations, tragic denouements. After the laboriousness of *Videoblues* and *Lost Leading Man*, their strained attempts at topicality and the following of trends, he has turned towards simplicity. His decision at first sight concerns only elements of style, but it in fact cuts to the bone. The most important decision was to make *Abandoned* a period film. Not only the representation of its world is authentic, but it actually evokes the motion pictures of that time. Not in a

retro manner, artistically or by copying styles, but through its attitude and mode of perception. Which is what helps unite the subtle, conservative cinematography of Péter Szatmári and the moderate and expressive music of the group After Crying. It is what helped Sopsits avoid a narrative form which to our contemporary mind would be the most natural perspective, that of the child (or children), and acknowledge the outdated role of the objective observer, of the omniscient narrator. This is how he could abandon what these days is probably the most neutral mode, tragicomedy, and do without comic or humorous counterpoints. Instead, the blue and brown of dreary reality contrasts with large dark and white spots, with the warm colours of that flight in the dream.

We could ask what Sopsits contributes to our considerable knowledge of closed communities, of hospital wards and public schools. But *Abandoned* is not meant to be a case study in custody: it is the story of Áron Soproni. Which only Árpád Sopsits could possibly tell us. ♦

Sir,—I may offer two pieces of information relating to the background of the new and interesting correspondence between Széchenyi, Lady Stafford and Palmerston. The Staffords were hungarophiles, well acquainted with the Hungarian freedom fight and its aftermath. Lord Dudley Stuart was one of Kossuth's protectors and friends and a parliamentary advocate of the

Hungarian cause. Because of him there are interesting Hungarian documents—e.g. a letter from Kossuth—in the Stafford archives. Dudley Stuart was a cousin of Lord Stafford and also a cousin of Palmerston.

Thomas Kabdebo  
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# MissionArt

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## Galéria

The MissionArt Gallery was founded in Miskolc in 1990 and has since organized exhibitions displaying works by the Transylvanian Nagybánya School and by contemporary artists, both in Hungary and abroad (Kempen, Vienna, Bucharest and Paris). Exhibitions have presented recent trends in Hungarian painting; the Nagybánya School series of exhibitions began in 1992. The first of this series, *Nagybánya from the Neos to 1944*, threw new light on Hungarian painting in this period. The series was accompanied by monographs, introducing several almost unknown artists (Oszkár Nagy, Tibor Boromisza, Dávid Jándi, Gizella Dömötör, Hugó Mund).

The Nagybánya retrospective was shown in Budapest (1996), Kempen (1997) and Vienna (1999). The gallery was invited to the Berlin Art Forum in 1997 and 1998; from 1999 it has been the only gallery from the old East European bloc to be present at the Cultura Arts Fair in Basle. Important Hungarian and foreign museums (Austrian, French and German) have made purchases from the Gallery.

Since 1992, MissionArt has been producing a series of books which have reaped professional and popular success. MissionArt was awarded the title of Hungarian Art Dealer of the Year in 1996.

The gallery's most important undertaking has been, jointly with the Hungarian National Gallery and the Haus der Kunst of Munich, organizing the *Mattis Teutsch and Der Blaue Reiter* exhibitions in Budapest and Munich. The best known Mattis Teutsch experts from Hungary, Romania, Germany and America took part in the preparation of the exhibition and the production of the catalogue. The scholarly work on these major exhibitions and their catalogues (in Hungarian, English and German) has further enhanced the Gallery's international standing.

Services provided by the MissionArt Gallery:

- purchase and sale of works of art
- sale on commission
- preparing expert opinions for legal purposes
- estimating
- expert advice
- investment advice

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## **Current Affairs**

*Unless we want our lives to be distorted and made miserable by the activities of what are, in the end, the activities of a few crazy people, we will go on and act normally. I remember the bombs in the Paris metro.*

## **History**

*Suddenly all the poubelles, rubbish bins, not just in Paris but throughout France, were closed. It lasted about a fortnight. People said where can I put things?*

## **Documents**

*And common sense triumphed. And the poubelles were opened. And have so remained.*

## **Fiction**

*We must not exaggerate the extent and level of threat and thereby give to "security" the right to push us about without reason, which many would happily do. I am in Budapest. It was the case here before. We don't want it back again!*

## **Poetry**

*From: Terrorism and Human Rights  
by Lord Russell-Johnston, pp. 5-11.*

## **Essays**

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