



The Quest for Central Europe

Author(s): Ivan Sanders

Source: *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-), Spring, 1990, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Spring, 1990), pp. 27-36

Published by: Wilson Quarterly

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40258043>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Wilson Quarterly is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-)

JSTOR

THE QUEST FOR CENTRAL EUROPE

by Ivan Sanders

Once upon a time there was a region of Europe united not so much by language or even history but by something more elusive—by hard-to-define common sensibilities and affinities. What is referred to ever more longingly today as Central Europe has in reality always been a crazy quilt of nationalities inhabiting countries wedged between the vastness of Mother Russia and the paternal rigor of Germany. Yet, because many of these countries were for centuries under Austrian tutelage, their people, sharing a common fate as more or less oppressed subjects of a far-flung empire, did develop mental habits and strategies that were remarkably similar. They also came to share certain values, not the least of which was a yearning for, and identification with, Europe.

Now it is not at all uncommon for people on the fringes of civilization to compensate for their provincial ways by espousing mainstream values more ardently than those at the center. The word *Europe* undoubtedly had a nobler ring in the eastern reaches of the continent than in its western parts. For centuries, Poles, Czechs, and Hungarians were propelled by the desire to live up to European standards and by the equally compelling need to dwell on the peculiarities of their own sorry history. In the process they created cultures that were not quite Western but not peripheral either.

In time, the passion to close gaps, to measure up and press ahead seemed to pay off, and by the end of the 19th century the major cities of these in-between lands were

catapulted into a modernity more daring, more dazzling than that of many a Western European metropolis. Yet the sophistication, even cultural radicalism of turn-of-the-century Vienna, Budapest, and Prague sprang from a spirit of defiance and iconoclasm that had been around for centuries. A penchant for irreverence and irony; a predilection for the odd, the grotesque; the ready espousal of the startlingly new, the startlingly complex—these are qualities that inform some of the greatest achievements of modern Central European culture: the literary art of Franz Kafka and Robert Musil as much as the painting of Gustav Klimt and Oskar Kokoschka; the music of Schoenberg and Béla Bartók as well as the theories of Sigmund Freud. To this day, a certain type of morbid humor, unflappability in the face of change, grace under perversity, suggest to many outsiders a quintessentially Central European characteristic. (The troubled hero of Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* expresses this perception: After sardonically reviewing a hard-luck life story filled with absurd deaths and suicides, he quips: "A terribly Middle-European joke, if you ask me.")

The brilliance and dissipation of the waning years of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy were memorably captured by a number of writers throughout the Empire. In retrospect, the turn-of-the-century Viennese playwright Arthur Schnitzler, the Hungarian novelist Gyula Krúdy, the Czech Jaroslav Hašek, the Croatian Miroslav Krleža appear, for all their differences, to be kindred spirits. What they share is a tone, at once satiric and elegiac, suggesting

WQ SPRING 1990

27

a very worldly understanding of complex political and psychological realities. Without consciously articulating a common Central European ethos, these writers evoked the rigidity as well the nonchalant slovenliness and strange beauty of the same declining world.

For much of the 20th century, however,



Prague (1848). From Mozart's time to Kafka's, Prague was a major center of European culture.

concern for the integrity of Central Europe was not on anyone's agenda. After the post-World War I collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, the so-called successor states, carved out of the former empire, were more interested in nurturing their own national identity than in seeking common ground. *Mitteleuropa* remained a Ger-

man dream, but its prewar architects had naturally meant unity under German stewardship. The term Central Europe was in fact invented by Tomáš Masaryk, the first president of independent Czechoslovakia (1918–1935), to counter the quasi-imperialist *Mitteleuropa* concept. After Hitler's ascent to power, most of the small nations of the region did fall under his sway, and Middle Europe became a German sphere of influence. Allied victory at the end of the Second World War transferred domination to the Soviets in the East. In a matter of years Central Europe became the Eastern bloc. "Central" or "Middle" survived only as geographical, climatic designations without any political or cultural content.

The revival of the idea of Central Europe may be a relatively recent phenomenon, prompted by specific political and cultural circumstances, but on a more elemental level we may speak of a much older, semantic struggle. Poles, Hungarians, Czechs, and Romanians have always resented being labeled East Europeans. Naturally enough, people who cherish their ties to Europe and consider the very word "West" an enticement, a challenge, want no part of an Eastern world with its connotations of remoteness and primitivism. How much more preferable it is to be in the *middle* of things, or better still in the *center*! For these nations, almost as painful as the reality of Soviet domination was the knowledge that, for the rest of the world, they were now, culturally too, appendages of the Soviet empire. This view remained unchallenged for decades, as Westerners became accustomed to speaking about these countries as a single unit, a bloc, or as

Ivan Sanders is holder of the Soros Lectureship in Hungarian Literature at Columbia University. Born in Budapest, he came to the United States in 1956. He received his B.A. (1965) and his M.A. (1967) from the City University of New York and his Ph.D. (1972) from New York University. He is the author of numerous essays on East European literature, translator of novels by, among others, George Konrád and Milan Füst, and co-editor of *Essays on World War I: A Case Study on Trianon* (1982).

Russia's client states, satellites, although ironically enough, their political connection, the fact that they had all become, and remained for 40 years, Soviet-style dictatorships, proved to be the most tenuous, easily dissolved link among them.

It was the Czech novelist Milan Kundera, living in exile in Paris since 1975, who resurrected the term Central Europe during the early 1980s. What seemed at first nothing more than impromptu reflections on the fate of Europe became an eloquent and poignant defense that met with an unexpected response in both the East and West.

In a 1980 interview with the novelist Philip Roth, Kundera was still defining his terms: "As a concept of cultural history," he said, "Eastern Europe is Russia, with its quite specific history anchored in the Byzantine world. Bohemia, Poland, Hungary, just like Austria, have never been part of Eastern Europe. From the very beginning they have taken part in the great adventure of Western civilization, with its Gothic, its Renaissance, its Reformation—a movement which has its cradle precisely in this region. It was here, in Central Europe, that modern culture found its greatest impulses . . ." A few years later, in his most frequently cited essay, "The Tragedy of Central Europe," Kundera went much further, arguing that Central Europe was, until recently, the West's last best hope, a place where ideas could still arouse passions, the written word still mattered, and artists were people to reckon with. What Kundera had in mind, however, was not a precisely defined geographical reality, certainly not a collection of sullen and downtrodden satellites: Central Europe becomes for him more of an imagined realm of shifting borders, a would-be confraternity, a republic of letters stubbornly upholding supreme cultural values. Yet, he maintained wistfully, even the dream is winding down, and So-

viet Russia is not the only one to blame. Europe, too, has changed; even in its Western heartland, culture has "bowed out," yielding its place to the all-pervasive, crassly commercial mass media. And since a distinctive Middle European identity can be defended only in a world that "maintains a cultural dimension," the tragic end of Central Europe seems at hand.

Of course not everyone was this pessimistic. To somebody like George Konrád, the Hungarian novelist and essayist, the dream as well as the reality of Central Europe is very much alive. He discovers the common spirit in small things: in congenial turns of phrase, in shared jokes, in knowing glances. For him, and others, the legacy of the long-defunct monarchy survives. Konrád describes Central Europe as the place where railroad stations are still painted "monarchy yellow," where Viennese operetta continues to be standard fare, where a coffee-house culture in some diminished form still exists. Other respondents to Kundera's essay preferred the more romantic, heroic connotation of the term "Central Europe," turning it into a metaphor for civilization and freedom. And for some, the designation assumed an almost spiritual quality. To the Polish-born poet Czeslaw Milosz, for instance, Central Europe is an "act of faith," a "utopia."

But unlike Kundera, neither Konrád nor Milosz would think of faulting Western commercialism for the historical decline of Central Europe. For both of them the problem lies in the political division of Europe, in the entire postwar order, in imperious decisions made by the Great Powers at Yalta. These decisions may have been inevitable—after all, in global power matches small nations are always losers—yet, these writers insist, it is the very vulnerability of Central Europe's small states that in the

AN UPSIDE-DOWN UTOPIA

*The old Austro-Hungarian empire, as depicted in Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* (1930), seems all delightful contradiction. In "Kakania"—an abbreviation for the double monarchy but also suggesting "caca"—nothing logically should work but everything does, barely.*

Kakania, that misunderstood State that has since vanished, was in so many things a model, though all unacknowledged Whenever one thought of that country from some place abroad, the memory that hovered before the eyes was of wide, white, prosperous roads dating from the age of foot-travelers and mail-coaches, roads leading in all directions like rivers of established order, streaking the countryside like ribbons of bright military twill, the paper-white arm of government holding the provinces in firm embrace. And what provinces! There were glaciers and the sea, the Carso and the cornfields of Bohemia, nights by the Adriatic restless with the chirping of cicadas, and Slovakian villages where the smoke rose from the chimneys as from upturned nostrils, the village curled up between two little hills as though the earth had parted its lips to warm its child between them. Of course cars also drove along those roads—but not too many cars! The conquest of the air had begun here too; but not too intensively. Now and then a ship was sent off to South America or the Far East; but not too often. There was no ambition to have world markets and world power. Here one was in the center of Europe, at the focal point of the world's old axes; the words "colony" and "overseas" had the ring of something as yet utterly untried and remote. There was

some display of luxury; but it was not, of course, as over-sophisticated as that of the French. One went in for sport; but not in madly Anglo-Saxon fashion. One spent tremendous sums on the army; but only just enough to assure one of remaining the second weakest among the great powers.

The capital, too, was somewhat smaller than all the rest of the world's largest cities, but nevertheless quite considerably larger than a mere ordinary large city. And the administration of this country was carried out in an enlightened, hardly perceptible manner, with a cautious clipping of all sharp points, by the best bureaucracy in Europe, which could be accused of only one defect: It could not help regarding genius and enterprise of genius in private persons, unless privileged by high birth or State appointment, as ostentation, indeed presumption. But who would want unqualified persons putting their oar in, anyway? And besides, in Kakania it was only that a genius was always regarded as a lout, but never, as sometimes happened elsewhere, that a mere lout was regarded as a genius.

All in all, how many remarkable things might be said about that vanished Kakania! . . . On paper it called itself the Austro-Hungarian monarchy; in speaking, however, one referred to it as Austria, that is to say, it was known by a

past made them hardy, taught them flexibility, tolerance. The problem, according to Konrád and Milosz, is not the decline of culture or the proliferation of kitsch feared by Kundera but intrusive superpowers politicizing, polarizing Europe. The erosion of Central European values can be stopped only by resisting superpower encroachments, by dismantling burdensome political and defensive structures, by being "antipolitical," to use George Konrád's favorite term. In 1984, Konrád not only rejected Kundera's bleak prognosis for the region; he affirmed—prophetically, it would

appear today—his own hopes for a brighter future: "I refuse to identify with either a tragic or sarcastic pessimism about Central Europe because I don't accept the chasm in the middle of Europe as necessary. On the contrary: I regard the present status quo in Europe as the product of force and compulsion, and I believe that it is artificial, temporary, and indeed already disintegrating. It is not a social but a military reality. I believe that the social reality can slowly struggle free of the grip of the military reality."

By the mid-1980s the rehabilitation of

name that it had, as a State, solemnly renounced by oath, while preserving it in all matters of sentiment, as a sign that feelings are just as important as constitutional law and that regulations are not the really serious thing in life. By its constitution it was liberal, but its system of government was clerical. The system of government was clerical, but the general attitude to life was liberal. Before the law all citizens were equal, but not everyone, of course, was a citizen. There was a parliament, which made such vigorous use of its liberty that it was usually kept shut; but there was also an emergency powers act by means of which it was possible to manage without Parliament, and every time when everyone was just beginning to rejoice in absolutism, the Crown decreed that there must now again be a return to parliamentary government. Many such things happened in this State, and among them were those national struggles that justifiably aroused Europe's curiosity and are today completely misrepresented. They were so violent that they several times a year caused the machinery of State to jam and come to a dead stop. But between whiles, in the breathing-spaces between government and government, everyone got on excellently with everyone else and behaved as though nothing had ever been the matter. Nor had anything real ever been the matter. It was nothing more than the fact that every human being's dislike of every other human being's attempts to get on—a dislike in which today we are all agreed—in that country crystallized earlier, assuming the form of a sublimated ceremonial that might have become of great impor-

tance if its evolution had not been prematurely cut short by a catastrophe.

For it was not only dislike of one's fellow-citizens that was intensified into a strong sense of community; even mistrust of oneself and of one's own destiny here assumed the character of profound self-certainty. In this country one acted—sometimes indeed to the extreme limits of passion and its consequences—differently from the way one thought, or one thought differently from the way one acted. Uninformed observers have mistaken this for charm, or even for a weakness in what they thought was the Austrian character. But that was wrong . . .

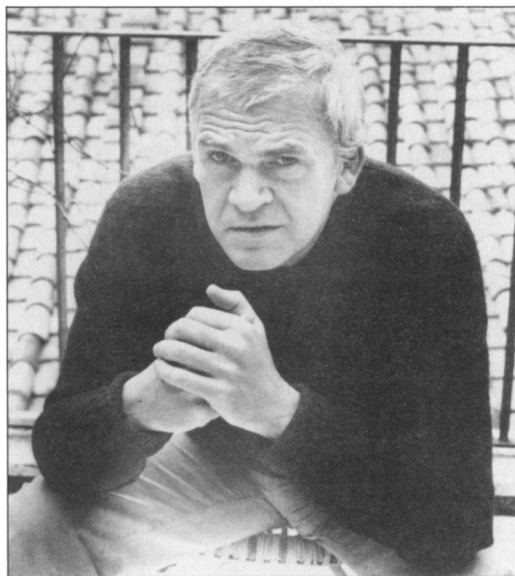
Kakania was, without the world's knowing it, the most progressive State of all; it was the State that was by now only just, as it were, acquiescing in its own existence. In it one was negatively free, constantly aware of the inadequate grounds for one's own existence and lapped by the great fantasy of all that had not happened, or at least had not yet irrevocably happened, as by the foam of the oceans from which mankind arose.

Es ist passiert, "it just sort of happened," people said there when other people in other places thought heaven knows what had occurred. It was a peculiar phrase, not known in this sense to the Germans and with no equivalent in other languages, the very breath of it transforming facts and the bludgeonings of fate into something light as eiderdown, as thought itself. Yet, in spite of much that seems to point the other way, Kakania was perhaps a home for genius after all; and that, probably, was the ruin of it.

Copyright © 1930 by Robert Musil. English translation © 1953 Secker & Warburg Ltd.

Central Europe as a concept was in full swing. After 30 years of disuse and even disgrace, the term was now on the lips not only of politically sensitive writers but of journalists, academics, and, increasingly, politicians and statesmen as well. Scholarly conferences and symposia were organized around the subject; journals devoted to the culture of Central Europe were launched on both sides of the Atlantic; even American critics like Irving Howe and Susan Sontag jumped on the bandwagon, writing admiringly of a new flowering of culture in the heart of Europe. As literary critics dis-

sected Central European works for common characteristics, and as historians and political scientists deliberated on political consequences, the idea of Central Europe was upheld not only as a defense against Soviet imperial designs but also as a counterweight to home-grown provincialism and nationalism. George Konrád put it succinctly: "Being Central European means learning to keep our nationalism, our national egotism, under control." In an area where justified patriotism always had a way of turning into chauvinist swagger or parochial mystification, there is plenty to keep



Novelist Milan Kundera popularized the idea that Central Europe—far from being an “Eastern bloc”—was in essence West European.

under control. Frequent mention was made of the special role played by Jews in Central Europe’s cosmopolitan cultures. Historically speaking, Jewish successes in East Central Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries presupposed a relatively tolerant, liberal society. As soon as narrowly defined national interests began to prevail, and an exclusionist, xenophobic kind of nationalism became the order of the day, Jews lost ground. And later in the century, the most extreme forms of nationalism had only to combine with military might and the efficiency of a modern totalitarian state to threaten their very existence. Central European Jewry is largely gone, its one-time influence fast becoming a historical memory. Yet to many, Jews remain the paradigmatic Central Europeans—tenacious individualists surviving the vicissitudes of history.

An awareness of history, a “historical imagination” as Czeslaw Milosz put it, resides at the heart of Central European culture. Where everything is infused with a

sense of history, there are no neutral subjects. Literary treatments of the most innocuous themes resonate with oblique political suggestiveness. The ongoing debate about Central Europe as a cultural entity itself illustrates this phenomenon, for it raises a number of uncomfortable questions about the peculiar relationship between art, history, and geography in this region. It was again Milan Kundera who caused a storm of controversy when in 1985 he published a literary essay in which he gave a negative appraisal of the Russian novelist Dostoyevsky—an appraisal that seemed to attack Russian culture directly, indeed to attack Russia itself. “What irritated me about Dostoyevsky,” Kundera writes in this essay, “was the climate of his novels; a universe where everything turns into feeling; in other words, where feelings are promoted to the rank of value and of truth.” Standing in contrast to this oppressive emotionalism was Kundera’s own rational, skeptical world view, which he considered far more invigorating.

Responding to Kundera, the Russian émigré poet Joseph Brodsky charged that the Czech novelist, was guilty of “sentimental distortions” of his own; Brodsky also found Kundera’s concept of civilization limited. Brodsky reminded the reader that Kundera is after all “a Continental, a European man,” and “these people are seldom capable of seeing themselves from the outside. If they do, it’s invariably within the context of Europe, for Europe offers them a scale against which their importance is detectable.”

The controversy between Central Europeans and Russians flared up again at the well-publicized 1988 Wheatland International Writers Conference, held in Lisbon. The Russian participants, many of them attending a Western-sponsored conference for the first time,

were uneasy about the concept of Central Europe, preferring to see individual countries in Eastern Europe, each with its own distinct culture, rather than an ill-defined whole. To them, Central Europe seemed both a myth and an affront; they sensed in all the talk of newfound European unity an attempt to detach Russia from Europe, to question the European character of the bulk of Russian culture. The same Soviet delegates were even more stunned when called to task for not doing enough as writers to force their government to remove its troops and tanks from East Central Europe. They bristled at the suggestion that they instinctively identified with their country's ambitions and interests. ("When am I going to take *my* tanks out of Eastern Europe?" asked an incredulous Tatyana Tolstaya, a descendant of the 19th-century master novelist, Leo Tolstoy.) Yet here too, the émigré Joseph Brodsky rallied to his compatriots' defense and stated that "the problems of Eastern Europe will be solved once the internal Russian problems will be solved."

But it wasn't only defensive Russians who refused to believe in the existence of Central Europe. There were enough skeptics in the countries concerned who felt that this fanciful redrawing of Europe's cultural map—restoring a unity that never was—amounted to little more than an intellectual game, indulged by East European émigrés out of touch with the world they left behind. It is true that the most vocal proponents of the Central European idea have been writers living in exile—Milan Kundera and the late Yugoslav novelist Danilo Kiš in Paris, Milosz in Berkeley, the Czech Josef Škvorecký in Toronto, or the Polish poet Stanislaw Baranczak in Cambridge, Massachusetts. And even some of the others, dissident writers who didn't leave their homes permanently, became infatuated with the notion of Central Europe while on visits abroad.

Those who never left were less sanguine about the prospects of Central European harmony. Knowing the ethnic strife and the historic rivalries of Eastern Europe, they kept reminding the idealists that there was enough to divide these countries even if the Soviet Union were to relax its grip on them. Besides, they added somewhat cynically, monolithic rule probably helped keep a lid on some of these potentially explosive conflicts. One need only think of the traditional hostility between Czechs and Slovaks, Poles and Germans, Hungarians and Romanians, Turks and Bulgarians.

In the West, too, the mystique of Central Europe has had its detractors. At yet another conference, this time at Ulm, West Germany, a German historian, Thomas Rotschild, offered a devastating analysis of the "intoxication" with Central Europe. First of all he called into question the alleged kinship between various East European art forms. (Czech filmmaking is radically different from Hungarian and Polish cinema, he claimed; a Hungarian Jewish novelist like George Konrád has more in common with the American Philip Roth than with Austrians like Peter Handke or Thomas Bernhard, etc.) Rotschild feared the leveling, standardizing effects of Central European integration even as he noted the conflicting motives behind the advocacy of regional unity:

When Milan Kundera, the Moravian writer living in Paris, or the Hungarian George Konrád rave about Central Europe, they mean something very different than when [the Trieste-based literary historian] Claudio Magris or his Austrian friends do the same; and all of them harbor very different notions from the Germans who with dubious justification have recently also been attracted to Central Europe. And while this turning toward the actual historical entity or to a future and still indistinct Central Europe may hold a number of attractive possibilities for Germans eager to curb powerful American influences, the Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, and

Hungarians favoring Central Europe are anxious to break away from the Soviet Union. And finally Austria, in the face of an oppressive German presence, is reviving its own Habsburg dreams of economic and cultural supremacy.

The conference at which these words were spoken was held in the summer of 1989, at a time when the winds of change could be felt in only two East European countries: Poland and Hungary. But in the months that followed, a most extraordinary series of events seemed to render the entire debate over Central Europe irrelevant. As one hard-line communist regime after another fell into the dust, as 40-year-old political structures came tumbling down along with the Berlin Wall, the division of Europe seemed at an end. In the ensuing euphoria, the unity of Central Europe was just too small a prize. The "European house," a phrase first promoted by Mikhail Gorbachev, became a metaphor for the oneness of Europe. East European historians who a few months earlier had excitedly formed "Central Clubs" were now setting up all-inclusive European forums.

But although the communist order in Eastern Europe may indeed have crumbled, and the Soviet Union may be in retreat, such developments alone would not make the Eastern countries more Western. Just a few years ago George Konrád said that if it was impossible to go over to Vienna from Budapest for an evening at the opera, then it was impossible to talk about a normal state of affairs in Central Europe. By the end of 1989 the borders were wide open, and any Hungarian able to afford high-priced Viennese theater tickets could certainly make the trip. But have the new freedoms really changed the quality of life for most Hungarians? As Konrád's fellow countryman, the novelist Péter Esterházy, put it: "Our culture may be Western, but our life is still Eastern."

Suppose a massive infusion of Western capital does help the economically ravaged, post-communist societies struggle to their feet. The question still remains whether a wholesale merger with Europe is what those calling for East-West unity really had in mind. Obviously, for millions of East Europeans used to privations and hungry for Western comforts, the prospect of this type of wealth-sharing is a tantalizing one. But even if all-European integration on a grand scale were feasible in the near future (which of course it isn't), the submersion of individual identities it may produce should give one pause. Understandably, it was again intellectuals with an affinity for Central European ideals who, at the height of last fall's jubilations, cautioned about overhasty, and possibly irreversible, political decisions. German writers, such as, Günter Grass (born in Danzig, now Gdańsk, Poland) and Christa Wolf (born in East Prussia), in opposing the push for German reunification, were clearly not interested in perpetuating old-style communism in East Germany but in preserving a Central European alternative to the Federal Republic. To them, a non-communist German Democratic Republic would not be a redundant entity but a country more actively involved than its slicker, more jaded Western counterpart in maintaining the humane socialist values of an older Europe.

Elsewhere in Europe, the revolutionary changes have focused attention on uniquely Central European problems and solutions. Last November, a little-noted though quite remarkable meeting took place in Budapest involving the foreign ministers of Austria, Hungary, Yugoslavia, and Italy, with the purpose of discussing regional economic and cultural cooperation. The unusually cordial and hopeful meeting was bent on renewing old ties and locating points of common interest. However, more important than the conference's specific

agenda was its symbolism. The meeting of neutral, NATO, and Warsaw-pact countries not only affirmed "antipolitical" Central European principles, it also pleased those with longer memories, to whom the Budapest meeting seemed like a reunion of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy.

Of course, nostalgia for the monarchy is nothing new in Central Europe, but lately sentimental affection has given way to programmatic admiration. Never have historians and politicians had so many kind words for the liberalism, the civilized *Gemütlichkeit* of the former multinational empire; never have they viewed its less-than-perfect unity with greater understanding. In Hungary, one political party even nominated the heir to the Austrian throne, Otto Habsburg, for president of the Hungarian Republic. Otto, a West German citizen, graciously declined, though his supporters in Budapest have not given up. As Habsburg historian Péter Hanák noted recently, "The growing mutual attraction between the former ruling dynasty and Hungarians waiting for a miracle is a fact of life in our day." Indeed, some Hungarians and Austrians feel they have already reestablished their Central Europe. The joint Vienna-Budapest World's Fair, planned for 1995, is perhaps the most grandiose expression of the rekindled Danubian consciousness.

Is this the real thing then, an Austrian-inspired new Central Europe? At least one local hero, Claudio Magris, Central Europe's leading literary historian, would welcome the idea. His influential book, *Danube* (1986), celebrates the diversity, the glorious eccentricities of Danubian civilization, in which the protean river becomes the paramount symbol of this civilization, standing in direct contrast to the Rhine with its mythic association of exclusivity and racial purity. "The Danube," writes

POLITICS: A DELICATE BALANCE

Claudio Magris in Danube depicts the art of governing in Central Europe:

The Habsburg art of government does not stifle dissidence or overcome contradictions, but covers and composes them in an ever-provisional equilibrium, allowing them substantially to go on as they are and, if anything, playing them off against one another. The ruler of the Empire is, by definition, a Proteus himself, changing his mask and his policy with supple mobility, and he therefore has no wish to transform his Protean subjects into a set of identical citizens. On the contrary, he allows them to pass from love to rebellion and vice versa, from depression to euphoria, in a game without end and without progress. He has no wish to impose some rigid unity on the various peoples, but to let them be themselves and live together in all their heterogeneity.

Magris, "is German-Magyar-Slavic-Romanic-Jewish Central Europe, polemically opposed to the German Reich." In *Europe, Europe* (1987), Hans Magnus Enzensberger's portraits of Budapest and Warsaw also stress the stunning irregularity and multiplicity of this Central European world, in which an essence, if there is one, is to be sought in a clamor of competing voices, contradictory desires, clashing styles. A third Western observer, the British journalist Timothy Garton Ash, in *The Uses of Adversity: Essays on the Fate of Central Europe* (1989), tries more persistently to define essential characteristics, though, after subjecting the writings of prominent Central European intellectuals to rational analysis, he too comes up against glaring inconsistencies and self-contradictions.

None of this should surprise us. There is no immutable Central European "essence," just as there is no immutable Central Europe. In Central Europe, adjusting to history's whims has and still takes daring

and cunning, plain-speaking and dissemblance. Thus can that most Western, most cerebral of Central Europeans, Milan Kundera, turn a blind eye to reason when his nation's fate is at stake. And thus can the equally European George Konrád claim that in his part of the world people have always been "artful dodgers, longshot players, sneaky idlers, rascals [who] paid a price for being honest more than once." The classic literary example of Central European wisdom could well be Jaroslav Hašek's *Good Soldier Švejk*, with its crafty realism and live-and-let-live attitudes. Švejk and the peculiar anti-heroic heroes of the contemporary Czechoslovakian writer Bohumil Hrabal have been important for people groping for models and for those reaching across arbitrary borders to find soulmates in other countries.

To outsiders it is often the protean flux and disparities of the Central European experience that are the most striking. Exasperated by the region's contradictions, Timothy Garton Ash concludes that "if the term Central Europe is to acquire some positive substance, then the discussion will have to move forward from the declamatory, the sentimental, and the incantational to a dispassionate and rigorous examina-

tion both of the real legacy of historic Central Europe . . . and of the true condition of present-day East Central Europe."

There is no question that, after the recent upheavals, there are new challenges—the need to democratize societies as well as governments, to better understand neighbors, to strike a balance between independence and integration are just a few. And they all require new approaches—less passion perhaps and more sobriety, more trust.

But the subjective element, the wariness, the skepticism will most likely remain, as well they should. "Skepticism," wrote an eminent Central European not long ago, "is inescapably a part of the spiritual, cultural, and intellectual phenomenon that is Central Europe That skepticism . . . is generally rather strange, a bit mysterious, a bit



The Good Soldier Švejk features a Central European hero: The "fool" Švejk, pliant and realistic, who outwits the rigid authorities.

nostalgic, often tragic, and at times even heroic, occasionally somewhat incomprehensible in its heavy-handed way, in its caressing cruelty and its ability to turn a provincial phenomenon into a global anticipation of things to come."

It may bode well for the future that the man who offered this appreciation of the Central European sensibility, the former Czech dissident playwright Václav Havel, is now the president of his country.