THE USES OF ADVERSITY

ESSAYS on the FATE of CENTRAL EUROPE

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A HUNGARIAN LESSON

Background Reading

Imagine a garden maze, a maze in which mirrors conceal the hedges, giving the illusion of open space and free movement but also distorting wildly, as in a fairground hall of mirrors. At one corner you look impossibly tall, thin, and pale, like the poet Petőfi; at the next, absurdly squat. First you confidently step forward—and hit a mirror. Then you nervously edge around an open space. But sometimes you can walk straight through a mirror (or hedge), only to find yourself in another alley. Here you meet the administrator of the maze, himself lost in it.

This is Hungary.

At a recent meeting of the writers' union, one of Hungary's most respected writers, István Eörsi, delivered a powerful appeal for censorship. Yes, *for* censorship. Give us censorship! he said. Give us one office that is clearly and officially denoted as the censors'. Specify its powers. Give us legal definitions of the boundaries. Prosecute us in the courts if we trespass beyond them. At least we would then know where the hedges are. Eörsi's idea was not new. Solidarity in Poland attacked the censorship in precisely this way, by demanding its self-definition, and partly achieved that goal in the 1981 law "On the Control of Publications and Public Performances." Even today, the

censorship is more explicit and visible in Poland than in any other East European state, which is a kind of progress.

In Hungary, the position is worse and better. Better, because in practice so much can be published officially, including works of Polish writers such as Witold Gombrowicz, that cannot be published officially in Poland. Worse, because since there is no censor, everyone has become a censor: not just the officials in those departments of the central committee and the culture ministry that are, in fact, politically responsible for censorship, but every newspaper editor, publisher's reader, television producer, and worst of all, the writer himself. Because there is not one censorship there are many censorships: collective and individual, political and social, pre- and post-publication, before, after, and during the very act of writing. In this respect, Hungary is more like the Soviet Union—where, as is well known, there is no censorship.

The Hungarian difference consists not in the machinery of censorship but in the way it is used. Pierre Kende[1] has identified three main surviving categories of "outright taboo." You may not question or criticize the Soviet presence in Eastern Europe, Soviet foreign policy in general, and neighboring socialist states insofar as they follow Soviet precepts. (This last is the only major constraint on what *economists* can publish officially.) The basic legitimacy of Communist party rule is also sacrosanct. Finally, you cannot directly attack Marxist-Leninist "socialism" by name.[2] Yet as Kende points out, there are startling exceptions even in these categories: A historical journal has published an astonishingly frank account of how the Communist party rigged the 1947 election, which formally legitimated its seizure of power, and even the great trauma of 1956 has

[1] *Censorship in Hungary*, pp. 43–54 in Study No. 9 of the Research Project "Crisis in Soviet-Type Systems," based in Vienna and directed by Zdeněk Mlynář.

[2] "Of course socialism remains a name," a high-placed official intellectual told me after describing his government's further moves toward capitalism. "I mean 'an aim' not 'a name,' " he corrected himself, tittering. But how often had he made this "slip" before, in private conversation with Western visitors?

been treated—with the barest of allegorical disguises—in fiction and drama.

Many Western observers apply the world *liberalism* to this state of affairs. Hungarian writers talk rather of *chaos* or *anarchy* in the cultural dictatorship. Nowadays, they say, you simply can't tell what will get through. There's almost nothing that *might not* be allowed; but what was permitted at eight o'clock may be denounced at noon. The instruments of control are out of sync. A new textbook on Hungarian language and literature (which includes a chapter on the Bible) is officially passed for use in schools; then it is fiercely attacked in the official press. Books that have passed through all the hoops of precensorship are suddenly withdrawn after being on sale for several days. This happened most recently to a biography of Béla Kun by a scholar at the Institute for Party History—following a protest from the Soviet embassy. And so on. Here is the moving maze.

Two main reasons are given for this "anarchy": one contingent, one systemic. The contingent reason is that György Aczél, the inventor of the maze, the Kádár of culture for a quarter of a century, is no longer in command. Aczél it was who in the late fifties and early sixties made the essential "Kádárite" bargain with writers. Its terms were, very roughly, that if they desisted from engaging in politics, as they had done with such spectacular results in 1956, if they observed the political limits, then the state, imposing virtually no stylistic limits, would publish and provide for them, generously, even lavishly. The maze has a deep-pile carpet. The limits were never clearly defined, but on any given borderline book, essay, or film, there was this one overlord who could say: "That is the wrong side of the hedge." But at the last Party congress, Aczél surrendered his overlordship of culture.

The systemic cause—which already began to take effect in the latter years of Aczél's reign—is quite simply that the people who administer the system do not believe in it any more than the people they are censoring do. Marxist-Leninist ideology in Hungary today is as ob-

viously wax as the face of Lenin in the mausoleum on Red Square. "If you write a rabidly anti-Russian article," a friend explains, "the editor or publisher's reader will not try to argue with you. He'll say: 'Marvelous piece. You're so right about 'fifty-six. I couldn't agree more. Have a drink on me.' " As a result, the censors have no objective criteria for deciding where the limits are: They too are lost in the maze. "Accepting the realities" is the slogan. But what are the realities for most editors or publishers? The realities are a judgment of what is acceptable to your superiors. But *their* realities too are mainly a judgment of what is acceptable to *their* superiors, and so on, up to the very top.

And what are the top people's realities? They are, we may surmise, twofold. First, there is the one living piece of Leninist ideology: the question of power. Here is a real criterion: Does this or that strengthen or weaken our power? But the answers to even this question in contemporary Hungary are often far from clear. Is it more strengthening or weakening ("stabilizing" or "destabilizing," in the jargon of Western political science) to allow relatively free debate about economic reform, to publish or to prohibit this book, that play? The second reality for Hungary's top people is the same as everyone else's: a judgment of what will be acceptable to their superiors. As most Hungarian writers are expert at judging what their editors will tolerate, so the top political leadership must be adept at judging just how much the Russians will tolerate. Rulers and ruled are united in self-censorship. The usual effect of these successive levels of self-censorship is to stop the writer or artist well short of the actual limits. But because even Party officials seem to find it increasingly difficult, with the best will in the world, to see things the way the Russians do, they sometimes walk through a hedge (or mirror) themselves. Then the Soviet embassy protests.

The maze has its own language. I call it the Hungarian Periphrastic. It is a language of diabolical circumlocution, of convoluted allegory and serpentine metaphor, all guarded by a crack regiment of sub-Germanic abstract-compound-nouns. Nothing is said directly. Everyone is taken from behind. A spade is never a spade. A crime

is never a crime. Here is central committee secretary Mátyás Szürös describing how foreign policy was made in the 1950s under the Comintern: "Essentially it was done by a collective and pluralistic decision." Pluralistic! "In certain specific cases this may have been harmful and as a whole perhaps objectionable in principle." This is newspeak turned against its makers.

Yet the great majority of Hungarian writers, intellectuals, and academics also live and work in the maze. They, too, write dialects of the Periphrastic. Their criticisms of the authorities are oblique, implicit, elliptical, or metaphorical. To the initiated and sophisticated reader, their meaning is no doubt entirely clear. The non–maze dweller and non-Hungarian speaker must hesitate to gloss what he does not understand. I am told that the finest contemporary Hungarian poetry and fiction are written and published in the maze. Their artistic quality I cannot judge, because so pitifully little is available in translation. Yet anyone can see that the Periphrastic is not a language to bring you to the barricades. It is the intellectual version of an attitude that prevails in the whole society: that of getting around the system rather than confronting it, of finding loopholes and niches rather than making demands of the state; and the premise of this attitude is, again by contrast with Poland, the essential permanence and immutability of the system.

Not everyone works inside the maze. Since the mid-1970s, Hungary, like Poland and Czechoslovakia, has seen the growth of an intellectual opposition with its own independent *samizdat* publications and a pronounced allergy to the Periphrastic. Today there are two leading *samizdat* reviews, *Beszélö* and *Hirmondó*, and three *samizdat* publishers, AB, ABC, and Hungarian October. The publishers have produced some twenty books in the last year. The reviews probably reach some ten thousand readers. So far, their main strength has been their treatment of social and political problems inside Hungary—poverty, inequality, alcoholism—and of developments in other Soviet-bloc countries. As the publisher's name suggests, the Hungarian October of 1956, that central *negative* reference point of officialdom, is the central *positive* reference point for the opposition.

While officials, and all too many Western analysts, argue that Hungary has got where it has *in spite* of the revolution, the opposition intellectuals maintain that it is only *because* of the revolution, because of the resistance, the refusal to "accept realities," and, yes, the bloodshed then, that Hungary's rulers now exercise their power in a relatively restrained, cautious, and tolerant fashion.

Emphasis falls on the word *relatively*. Generally speaking, those who publish regularly in *samizdat* will not be published officially and will be disbarred from official employment. Even with such an extensive second economy, this can make it very difficult for them to make ends meet. In addition, they may experience difficulties in staying in their state-owned apartments and in the education of their children. In this respect, too, the difference between Hungary and other Soviet-bloc states is one of degree, not of kind.

This is still a modest opposition by Polish standards. Hungary's "democratic opposition" of intellectuals has not yet developed either a distinctive political strategy, such as KOR did in Poland, or those links with other classes—above all, workers—without which Solidarity would never have been born. Its impact has nonetheless been considerable. Probably the main effect so far has been to extend the limits of the possible in official culture. Editors of official journals, who themselves have anyway become bolder since the late 1970s, can now argue that if they do not publish this author or that essay, he or it will "go into *samizdat*."

Moreover, the great social issues that the opposition opened up—the growing inequality, partly as a result of economic reform, the 20 to 30 percent of Hungarians living below the poverty line—have been taken over by the official intellectual establishment. The best empirical studies of inequality are now being made by official and even Party sociologists, who naturally have all the resources to conduct the necessary research. In this sense, some of the opposition's best clothes have been stolen, and it has willy-nilly become part of the official cultural game. Though not in the maze, it is yet *of* the maze.

Coming from Poland, you expect the great divide to lie between

opposition and collaboration, black and white, the craven and the brave. But here the needle on your Polish moral compass swings helplessly to and fro. Other fault lines cut across the canyon. There is, for example. the historic divide between "populist" and "urbanist" writers. The populists have traditionally celebrated the folk virtues of Hungarian village life, *la terre et les morts; Kultur* rather than *Zivilisation*. The urbanists were (and are) more cosmopolitan and often Jewish. (There are still as many as 100,000 Jews in Hungary.) Traditionally to be found on the left bank of the Danube, in the cafés of Pest rather than the hills of Buda, politically also "on the left," they have looked outward to Vienna and the West rather than inward to the Transylvanian strongholds of agrarian Hungarianness. They have been drawn to sociology rather than to ethnography, and to socialism rather than to nationalism. Such descriptions are, of course, historical caricatures. Yet it is curious to find that the question Urbanist or populist? is still quite as important as the question Officially favored or dissident? There is even today a distinct group of populist writers, an intellectual party with one recognized "leader." Their great political theme is the fate of the Hungarian minorities in Yugoslavia, Slovakia, and, above all, in Romanian Transylvania. There, systematic cultural discrimination, and outright persecution by the dreaded Romanian security service (the Securitate), has dramatically worsened the position of the two million–strong Hungarian minority in recent years.

In Poland during the 1970s there was a deliberate, difficult, and fruitful coming together of intellectuals from traditions that just twenty years before had been bitterly opposed: Jewish socialists sat down with Christian Democrats, former Stalinists with Home Army veterans, hardened ex-revisionists with inspissated Thomists. In Hungary, this summer saw a first major attempt at such intellectual bridge-building: a secretly organized meeting of some forty-five intellectuals at a camp site in Monor, some thirty miles southeast of Budapest. The participants were carefully chosen to represent different traditions and groups—democratic opposition, populists, urbanists, independent writers, sociologists, reformist economists.

"The idea," one of the organizers told me, "was a kind of popular front." They met for two days to discuss the position of the national minorities, the economy, efficiency vs. equality, the mounting social problems of poverty, alcoholism, welfare deprivation.

What emerged from Monor is not—or not yet—something one could call a united, let alone a popular, front. Thus far, one can detect no distinctive political strategy, no common program for post-Kádár Hungary. But there was at least a common debate: economists explaining the imperatives of further reform to sociologists concerned about the resulting inequalities; populists and urbanists exchanging different views of Transylvania. Perhaps more than anything else it is the direct persecution of Hungarians in Romania that has catalyzed this convergence: the kind of persecution that, as it were, *evades* the Hungarians in Hungary. Nicolae Ceauşescu as the godfather of Hungarian intellectual life—what an irony! Deeply unreliable rumor in Budapest has it that when Kádár went to see Gorbachev in September, the Soviet leader asked him: "What's this I hear about your intellectuals getting together at Monor?"

The Lesson

October 14. Tomorrow, the European Cultural Forum—an official international conference to review part of the Helsinki agreements—will open in the gleaming conference center next to the Novotel, all burnished metal and tinted glass. The airport metal detectors are being maneuvered into place, to prevent any unofficial persons getting through. This is an event without precedent: the first Helsinki follow-up meeting to be held in a Soviet-bloc country, a French suggestion enthusiastically taken up by Hungary at the Madrid review conference that ended earlier this year. Tomorrow, delegates from the thirty-five states that signed the Helsinki Final Act will begin their fine speeches.

But today the talk is not of that. Today the talk is of an "unofficial" or "parallel" forum organized by the International Helsinki Feder-

ation for Human Rights, which links human-rights monitoring groups in ten Western countries. They have invited Western writers like Susan Sontag, Amos Oz, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, and East (or Central!) European writers currently living in the West—the Czech Jiří Gruša, the Hungaro-Yugoslav Danilo Kiš—to come and discuss with their Hungarian colleagues, in a conference room at the Intercontinental Hotel, such modest themes as "Writers and Their Integrity" and "The Future of European Culture."

By the standard of previous Helsinki follow-up meetings, in Madrid, Stockholm, or Ottawa, this is to be a truly inoffensive fringe group: This is no exile organization planning to surround the Novotel with placards demanding "Freedom for Sakharov" or "Independence for the Baltic States." By Soviet standards, it is diabolical. Today, the diplomatic community vibrates to the echo of Czechoslovak and Soviet demands for the Hungarian government to ban it. So tomorrow the diplomatic niceties. Tomorrow the high-flown self-congratulatory Eurorhetoric. But today the struggle.

I ask a senior Hungarian official for his response. The Hungarian government is committed to protecting the personal security of delegates to the (official) forum, he says. Like Western governments, it is very concerned about the threat of terrorism. But can't they be fairly sure that, say, well-known Western writers are not terrorists? "Perhaps," he replies, "perhaps. But *what about the people who come with them?*" Aha.

Returning across the Danube, I find that the Intercontinental Hotel has cancelled the conference room booking. Another room booked in a different hotel has also been hastily withdrawn "because the windows are being repaired." (Some windows are indeed being repaired in this hotel, where I happen to be staying, but these windows are not in that room.) Next day, the Helsinki Federation organizers go to meet an official at the foreign ministry. A small group of us—journalists, participants, unofficial Hungarians—await their return in the near-deserted café of the Intercontinental.

Suddenly, the tables closest to us are occupied by burly, fat-faced men in sheeny jackets, with cheap Japanese watches and fists like

Prague hams. They sip mineral water. Their eyes avoid ours, but their ears rotate in our direction, like radar dishes. František Janouch, an exiled Czech human-rights activist who has just arrived from Stockholm, springs up and starts taking photographs. Our neighbors bury their faces in their hams.

I begin to feel quite at home. We could almost be in Warsaw, or even Prague. It is no surprise to learn later this afternoon of a statement given to the organizers at the foreign ministry, declaring that the unofficial symposium "could disturb the atmosphere and work" of the official forum, and finding it "incomprehensible why there is this private initiative." But incomprehensible to whom? The statement is unsigned.

So have we found the limit after all? At last, a real, palpable limit to Hungarian tolerance, something we can hit our heads against, like a wall, a mirror, or a hedge?

No, we haven't.

For this very evening we all assemble in the spacious flat of István Eörsi (he who demanded censorship), its windows giving a marvelous view of the Danube. Eörsi himself is in West Berlin—the invisible host defies the anonymous statement. Here speaker after speaker gets up on the sofa and says everything that may not be said in the official forum: György Konrád, Susan Sontag, Miklós Haraszti, the Transylvanian philosopher Gáspár Miklós Tamás, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, speaking on censorship, *samizdat*, the persecution of the Hungarians in Transylvania, Solidarity, Charter 77—you name it, we hear about it. And the Hungarian authorities do nothing. For the next two days we meet in another private apartment and discuss those modest themes—writers and their integrity, the future of European culture—very much as planned. Most of the leading figures of the Hungarian opposition are here—including the independent publisher György Krassó, who was under house arrest until a week ago. In practice, no one is prevented from coming.

This is a beautiful loft apartment, with heavy brown-stained wooden beams and large studio windows looking across to the Buda

hills, magical at twilight. The faded rugs, the Transylvanian pottery, the old glass-fronted bookcase (hallmark of Central Europe)—every detail speaks of an individual taste, of private and independent life. What a contrast to the antiseptic public interiors of the Novotel! As with the furniture, so with the speeches. There, the official Romanian delegate, after explaining that in his country "more than 14,000 cultural establishments are used by some 270 million people every year,"[3] lauds the rich cultural freedom in which Romania's Hungarian and German minorities can "express themselves in their mother tongue." Here, we learn the true story of increasingly harsh discrimination and persecution: Hungarian-language teaching abolished; Hungarian book and magazine publishing reduced to a trickle; Hungarian priests beaten and even killed by the Romanian Securitate; the Hungarian poet Géza Szőcs besieged in Koloszvar (Cluj), interrogated almost every day, telephone cut off, manuscripts confiscated and destroyed—"The candle is running low," he writes to his friends in Hungary, "and this is my last candle."

There, at the official forum, the delegate from the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic proclaims—in Russian—the glories of a culture subordinated to the socialist state. Here, we listen to one of the many gifted Czech authors persecuted and expelled by that state. Here, too, we can read the answers of writers still in Prague to a questionnaire that asked them what that state—and the Budapest Cultural Forum—could do for their besieged culture. "It is as if you were to ask what a cow can do for the flowers in a meadow," writes Ludvík Vaculík. "There is a simple answer: It could stop eating them. But can a cow do that? No way! For that reason there is no point in inviting a cow to some conference, seminar, or symposium about meadow flowers. The cow will gladly come, just for show, but anything it might say there is worth . . . a cow-pat."[4]

[3] The population of Romania is 22 million.

[4] *A Besieged Culture: Czechoslovakia Ten Years After Helsinki*. Available from Charta 77 Foundation, Box 50041, S-10405 Stockholm, Sweden, and from the Helsinki Watch Committee, 36 West Forty-fourth Street, New York, NY 10036.

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It is impossible to summarize our debates. Memorable things are said by some of the Western guests—Amos Oz on the writer as smoke detector; Alain Finkielkraut defining both Europe and culture in ten minutes, as only a French intellectual can; François Bondy in praise of old ideas; Hans Magnus Enzensberger in search of a new one—as well as some unmemorable cant of the "literature is freedom and freedom is literature" variety. But the real value lies in the East and Central European contribution. Here is Jiří Gruša, brilliantly skeptical about the writer as "tale salesman" in the West *and* about the writer as disillusioned prophet in the East; Danilo Kiš, with a scintillating anatomy of self-censorship; no Poles, alas (a great lack), but all the more Hungarians. If there is one central point that emerges, it is perhaps the unimaginable *complexity* of censorship and self-censorship—as György Konrád remarks, we need a new science: censorology.

Yet as the second afternoon wears on, I feel a slight unease creep up behind me. A local writer delivers a short spiel. The local audience laughs appreciatively. I wait eagerly for the translation. It comes out something like this: "Only the irrational is real, and Che Guevara, like Mohács, points to the 'hope' of hopelessness, which is itself the irrational hopelessness of reason." Well, ho ho. But surely we are back in the kingdom of the Periphrastic? And then, all the Hungarians are being so damn polite to each other. I know from private conversations that many of them are, for example, strongly critical of some of Konrád's larger and vaguer ideas. But do we hear this criticism here? We do not. Here it is all "my friend" this and "my friend" that. There is no unseemly controversy. This is the ultimate, the most understandable, and even morally defensible form of intellectual perversion: the *self-censorship of opposition*. And then of course we all know that the fact of this meeting's taking place will be bruited around the world (and *sotto voce* by Hungarian officials) as further proof of the Hungarian government's infinite cunning and "liberalism," whatever happens to the opposition when the limelight has moved on.

No, we are not yet in the maze. But we, too, are somehow *of* the maze.

Comprehension Test

You should now be able to interpret the following scene.

After the symposium, György Konrád invites you to a small evening party at his apartment. When you arrive, you are surprised to find yourself sat down, rather solemnly, between Susan Sontag and Danilo Kiš, in a small circle in front of the leader of the populists, a writer called Sándor Csoóri, and a few of his associates. Konrád stands modestly aside, next to the tiled oven, and says, "I would like my friends to tell you about Transylvania." This they, or rather he—the leader of the populists—proceeds to do at length, with some chilling stories of Romanian persecution, slowly, almost ceremoniously translated (for, as befits a true populist, the leader speaks only Hungarian) by a member of his court.

What is going on?

Notes

a) The competent student will answer that this scene reflects the common and mounting concern among Hungarian intellectuals about the worsening position of their compatriots in Transylvania. This answer is good as far as it goes. The more advanced student of intellectual politics will suggest that György Konrád, himself so very obviously from the cosmopolitan, urbanist, democratic tradition, is here making a demonstrative gesture of friendship—or at least, common-frontship—to the populists, in the spirit of Monor. The student who is both advanced and cynical may further inquire why the populists seem to be making common front with the opposition. Could it possibly be that by so doing they hope to pressure the authorities into giving them their own literary journal? The really outstanding

student, however, will conclude that if the author of this article had spent one more day in Budapest, met one more intellectual in one more café, he would probably have come up with yet another "true" or "real" reason, spied another distorted reflection in the mirrors, turned another corner in the maze.

b) Only one thing is certain: Nothing is certain. The hedges move daily. The Hungarian Party-state still has all the instruments it needs to punish the few outside the maze, if it wants to. There are no laws that curb its powers of censorship. There are, however, laws that could be used to gag writers, editors, and publishers—for example, the very elastic incitement paragraphs of the criminal code, as György Bence pointed out in an impressive paper prepared for the unofficial forum. During the official Budapest Cultural Forum, all has been sweetness and light—or almost all. But when you read this, the cultural forum will be drawing to a close, or already over. Will our hostess have suffered difficulties because she loaned her beautiful loft apartment for our meeting? We took no risk: She did. Will György Krassó be back under house arrest? An alert Western public opinion *can* make a difference in a state as careful of its Western reputation as Hungary is. It may even help ensure that the reputation is increasingly deserved. In other words, dear and patient reader: Their Country Needs You.

(December 1985)