

INTRODUCTION

*When one finds a natural style, one is amazed and delighted,
for where one expected to see an author, one discovers a man.*

—Pascal, in the *Pensées*.

In every form of art there are styles that flaunt the element of artifice and styles that seem scarcely to take it into account. What we are drawn to in the former is the unremitting and transforming pressure of invention, inspiration, and imagination. The materials of experience are subordinated to the interests of art, and we are never in any doubt that it is art rather than life that is claiming our attention. What appeals in the latter – in styles so “natural” that they seem to bear little significant relation to the imperatives of artifice – is something quite different. We are drawn to the revelation of experience itself. In such work we are made to feel that we are being given unexpected access to a special world, and the role of inspiration – and even that of imagination – is not so much to transform experience as to illuminate it.

The photographs that are now collected for the first time in *Hungarian Memories* belong unmistakably to this latter category. They speak to us from, and about, the world of André Kertész’s youth and early manhood: the world that Kertész left behind when he arrived in Paris in the 1920s and made his now celebrated entry into the life of art there. They differ in certain respects from the pictures for which Kertész is nowadays well known. Not only are they closer to his early, formative experience in Budapest and its surrounding countryside – a landscape that, except for the First World War, seems scarcely to belong to the twentieth century – but they are not yet firmly enclosed in the artistic strategies that the photographer perfected during his first years in Paris. They represent, in a sense,

Kertész before he became the Kertész that we know from numerous publications, exhibitions, and commentaries.

What Kertész achieved in his early years in Paris has long been acknowledged to have been central in shaping the photographic style of an entire epoch. Out of his quick, offbeat, idiosyncratic style came the work of Brassai and Henri Cartier-Bresson and their legion of imitators, many of whom were hardly aware of working in a mode that Kertész had invented. (“When the history of modern photography in Europe is finally written,” Weston J. Naef has observed, “we shall find that André Kertész is a little like Christopher Columbus, who discovered a new world that, in the end, was named for someone else.”) The essence of this style lay in its power to wrest from the happenstance moment a durable pictorial form that was also an incisive account of a commonplace experience. At once rigorous and casual, analytical and improvised, it was a very cosmopolitan style, and it clearly owed much to the artistic ferment of the School of Paris and the standards that governed it.

The photographs of *Hungarian Memories*, however, are the work of a young man in the provinces who has little to guide him but the delicacy of his sensibilities, his yearning for a creative vocation, and his affinity for a medium he came to love at an early age.

Kertész was born in Budapest in 1894. His family was in business, and it was for a career in business that he was trained at the Academy of Commerce in Budapest. In 1912 he went to work as a clerk in the Budapest Stock Exchange, and it was in that year, too, that he bought his first camera: an ICA box camera using 4.5 x 6 cm plates. In all photographic matters he was entirely self-taught, improvising a darkroom in his parents' house and doing his printing at night when the family had retired.

From the outset Kertész seems to have prized mobility, spontaneity, and the chance encounter – a disposition that stood him in good stead when, years later in Paris,

he acquired his first Leica. (That was in 1928.) Part of this impulse, no doubt, had to do with the office job he despised, for it was only in walking the streets and in the countryside that he was free to pursue his photographic interests. To appreciate the circumstances in which the photographs gathered in *Hungarian Memories* were produced, one has to bear in mind not only the photographer's youth (Kertész was eighteen when he started) but his mode of life at the time. First there was the office job at the stock exchange, then four years of service in the Austro-Hungarian army in the First World War (he was wounded in 1915), then a return to yet another office job after the war to help support his widowed mother. Like many young and aspiring artists, before and since, Kertész lived a divided life, shuttling between arid routine and precious hours of release. The tensions inherent in this situation – between the office and the street, between city obligations and country pleasures, between the bourgeois household and the private world of the darkroom, and finally between the demands of army life and the detachment of the freewheeling observer – form the essential subtext of every one of these early pictures. No wonder, then, that for the young Kertész photography came to signify not only a vocation but the free life of the spirit.

There is thus a quiet personal rebellion at work in these pictures. Yet how thoughtful, good-humored, and pure the pictures are! This is true not only of the landscapes and genre scenes that constitute a good many of the most beautiful images to be found in *Hungarian Memories*, but it is also true, amazingly enough, of Kertész's photographs of the war and the Commune that was briefly established in Hungary when revolution broke out after war caused the collapse of the empire. There is nothing either violent or ideological in these pictures of political upheaval. Kertész was somehow able to bring a *flâneur's* detachment to bear on subjects that inspired a disfiguring partisanship and cynicism in others. The picture on page 82 shows us one of the first Communist demonstrations to take place in Budapest in November 1918. It is not essentially different from the picture that follows on page 83, showing us the Roumanian occupation force arriving in Budapest soon after.

It was not, in any case, for the banner-headline events of history that Kertész ever had a special taste. He was never that kind of photo-journalist even when, after he emigrated to France in 1925, he began contributing to the leading European papers. In situations of social upheaval, Kertész tended to be more interested in moments of tender personal feeling than in the sweep of impersonal history. The quintessential Kertész touch is thus to be found in pictures that concentrate on unexpected human contacts or revelations of feeling. The photograph on page 81, for example, was taken on July 20, 1916, and shows us a group of displaced persons being herded through a city street. What for Kertész is the high moment is the sudden discovery by two people in this dispirited crowd that they recognize each other.

We find this same perspective in virtually all of Kertész's pictures of the First World War: a perspective that concentrates on the human scale of the events it recounts and that remains untouched and uncorrupted by any sort of political or nationalistic cant. They are as far removed from being propaganda pictures as any pictures of war can ever be. John Szarkowski once said of Kertész that what most interested him was "not the epic but the lyric truth," and war is probably the subject that poses the most severe challenge to this disposition. Yet Kertész met this challenge with an equanimity that we now recognize as one of the essential features of his sensibility. His war pictures are classics of the antirhetorical mode, and take their place beside the poems and novels that gave us the deepest truths about the war.

It will readily be seen that *Hungarian Memories* constitutes a kind of autobiography, and the war experience is only a part – though a very important part – of the chronicle that is disclosed to us in its pages. Another of its archetypal themes is love – both Kertész's love of life, which in his case is indistinguishable from the affectionate, often humorous and incisive "eye" he lavishes upon it wherever he chances to encounter it; and the central, most enduring love of his life, his darling Elizabeth, whom he met as a young man in Budapest, later married while he was living in Paris, and whose loving husband he re-

mained through a marriage lasting nearly half a century. In *Hungarian Memories*, Elizabeth Sali makes only a fleeting appearance as Kertész's beloved sweetheart, yet what unforgettable images these pictures are! She first appears on page 19, and is shown painting at her easel on a hillside of wild flowers. The picture was taken in Budapest in 1919 about a year after they first met. She reappears on the next page in a picture from the same year, and in this one she is shown sketching on a farm while peasant children sit watching. She is shown again drawing on a street poster in Budapest in 1920 (page 76) in a picture that is a forerunner of what afterwards became a whole subgenre for generations of photographers. Yet the most haunting of these pictures is the final one on page 165 in which Kertész and his beloved are silhouetted against the night sky in Budapest. It remains one of the simplest and most graphic of Kertész's early images, yet what a world of magic and romance it contains. In love, as in war, Kertész's delicacy – the quality of feeling he had from the beginning – never failed him.

What finally gives an extraordinary unity and power to the pictures in *Hungarian Memories* is precisely this special quality of feeling for both the world that is observed and the medium that is employed in its representation. In discovering his true vocation so early in life, Kertész was in the lucky position of making photography itself an integral part of his growth as a man. We are never made to feel that the medium exists as something separate from his experience. From the beginning he has made it central to everything he feels and sees and thinks about. As his experience changed and the man matured, his style naturally changed as well. Later it became lighter, more buoyant, and at times more comical and more serene. In Paris he lost his taste for twilight and romantic shadows, and moved more freely with a lighter camera and a faster step. But in Paris, of course, he no longer had to steal time from office routine and army duties. *Hungarian Memories* is a young man's book, but it is also the book of a young master.

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