

Introduction

THE HISTORY of Hungary is the history of a small nation which, in spite of centuries of oppression, was able to maintain its national culture and way of life. This was due in part to the role Hungarian writers and writing have played in supporting and exemplifying national ideals. In the great revolution against Austria in 1848-1849, for example, the men who formulated the ideals of independence (ideals subsequently trampled underfoot by Czarist Russia) were young intellectuals, and in particular, writers. Through the nineteenth century and up to the downfall of fascism the Hungarian writers attempted to keep the great social and human problems of the Hungarian people on the public agenda.

When Hungary became a Soviet Satellite under control of a small Communist Party, Hungarian writers either lapsed into silence, or, in protest against the injustices of the past, joined the Communists. These latter, writers of the younger generation chiefly, projected the obligatory themes

in their works: they defended Communist political, economic and cultural policies. They propagandized for a collective agriculture and for labor competition; they wrote paeans to Communist heroes — Stalin and Rakosi — and glorified the Red Army; and they adopted the premises of “Socialist realism” which meant, essentially, apologizing for Communist society and the “New Man” it sought to create.

But artists and their work live in relation to a people and to a social reality, and even writers committed to Communism could not fail to see the gaping abyss between the promises of Marxist theory and the failures and oppression of Communist practice. Moreover, in spite of the considerable material rewards the Communist governments offered to Hungarian artists, they denied the writer that artistic freedom basic to his intellectual and spiritual survival, and against this yoke, as well as against the political and economic shackles imposed on the nation, the writers rebelled.

Gradually, in spite of rigid Party censorship and State control of all publications, the undercurrent of discontent and criticism suppressed in the people began to be spoken in the poetry and prose of the writers. Writers were continually reprimanded for violating the Party line but the writers, even the Communist writers, had become aware that they had not only betrayed the people, for whose improvement they had chosen to accept the rigid dogmas of Party control, but that in so doing they had simultaneously betrayed the wellsprings of their own creative individuality. If they accepted the annihilation of the national spirit and tradition, they were forced to accept the annihilation of their own individual spirits and resources.

The Hungarian Revolt of October 1956 was the result of a very complex web of political, economic and intellec-

tual causes, but undoubtedly one of the most important catalytic factors was the role and expression of the Hungarian writers. Hungarian writing fed the fires of ferment and shaped the aims and nature of the insurrection by attempting to express the nation's resistance to oppression, both domestic and foreign.

The changing political climate of Hungary had made writing of this kind more than difficult. For a long time, from 1948 when the Communists seized power, to 1953, all creative effort was most rigidly controlled and violations of the Party line were severely punished. In 1953, however, when the then Premier Imre Nagy introduced the milder policies of the New Course, the writers had eighteen months with much more of the possibilities of writing and publishing than had formerly been available to them. But stricter controls were once more imposed when Matyas Rakosi forced Imre Nagy out of the government and returned to power.

Some sense of the history of an individual writer, and of writers in Hungary in general, can be discerned in the words of a young and much decorated Communist poet, Lajos Konya, who after years of rigidly following the Party line, finally confessed:

“You see, the government admits that when it demanded so many sacrifices from the people, it was wrong. I feel myself doubly guilty because it was in the most persuasive way, by means of poetry, that I helped to make those useless sacrifices. And further, was I right, when in the largest part of my work I wrote of positive events and of people and patterns pointing toward the future? Was it perhaps only a kind of *hurrah!* optimism that had taken hold of me?...

“Up to 1949 I even wrote verses on the standard of living, and up to that point, the improvement of the

living standards was a fact. After that I decided that for the years that followed no such improvements had occurred, so I didn't write about it. . . .

"I felt in myself a sort of conflict between the people and the Party, and I had somehow to resolve it within myself. I found an intellectual solution; I came to look on the errors and difficulties as temporary things we were going to conquer. I trusted the Party and its leadership; I never doubted their intentions.

"And yet the new program of the government shocked me: if they see the faults so clearly now, why didn't they speak of them sooner, and why didn't they correct them? I must answer this question; all of us must. If we saw how life in Hungary was, why didn't we draw our leaders' attention to it? Let's not excuse ourselves by saying that such directions were virtually impossible because they would have gotten stuck in the filters of editors, bureaucrats and theater managers. This is true, but it is only half-true. Because harsh words were scarcely tolerated in published works, the writers, who were very much aware of these facts, often exercised a sort of advance self-censorship, for they wanted to see their writings in print. . . .

"But did we write to the Party leaders, or talk to them? Did we warn them or did we trust them blindly because we assumed they knew their business and also saw all the things we saw? Today, we tell ourselves we could have done more, and that we bear a large part of the responsibility. . . . Not that what I said was untrue, but what I left unsaid, which would have made it the entire truth."

When the writers realized what had happened, as Konya did, they wrote and in writing portrayed the nature of Hungarian reality. They no longer shaped words out of

Party slogans; they drew their words from the life and feelings of their people and from their own inner visions. In one way or another, by writing obliquely and in allegory, by openly criticizing and defying State and Party rebuke and censorship, and the ever present threat of the prisons of the political police, they continued to write and publish some of their work.

After the revolt came and for a few brief days appeared to be successful, publication was freed. An efflorescence of writing took place, but most of it was journalistic; fiction, poetry and drama are longer in the making and hence fewer poems, plays and stories saw print. And in those few days it was almost as if the requirements that writer Gyula Hay had called for before the meetings of the Hungarian Writers' Association had been fulfilled:

"As far as literature is concerned, that 'clean slate' would be really clean only if an inviolable statutory decree were written on it: a decree granting complete freedom of literature.

"Complete freedom of literature, some frightened people would ask? Let's get over that fear. Yes, complete freedom of literature is what we are thinking of. And by this we understand the fullest, most unlimited freedom possible among human beings living in society. In other words literature should not be forbidden to do anything that is not forbidden by laws applicable to the whole of society. Hence, the writer should not be allowed to instigate to murder, arson, robbery, larceny, overthrowing the People's Democracy, atrocities against certain segments of society or certain professions, to racial discrimination, petty bureaucratic tyranny, etc. He should not even be allowed to infringe certain moral norms which, though not codified, are obviously accepted by the overwhelming majority.

"On the other hand, the writer like everyone else should be entirely free to tell the truth; to criticize everybody and every thing; fall in love; feel sorrow; not to weigh whether light and shadow are balanced in his work; to believe in divine omnipotence; to be an atheist; to doubt the correctness of certain data of the planned economy; to think in a non-Marxist way; to think in a Marxist way, even if his ideas have not yet been classified as one of the obligatory truths; to call the living standard low of those people whose salary raises have not yet been planned; to consider unjust an action or a condition which officially is still declared to be just; not to like certain leaders; to propose honest ways out of dilemmas which are deemed unrealistic by our political and economic leaders (even if, subsequently, the writer's conception should actually turn out to be unrealistic); to describe evils without simultaneously prescribing a remedy; to find the New York Cafe ugly though it is considered a historic monument and in spite of the millions spent on it; to notice that Budapest is deteriorating because of the lack of funds for renovating houses; to disapprove of the way of life, the manner of speech, and the working methods of certain leaders; to strike a blow for humanitarianism even where less sensitive souls see no inhumanity; to like Stalin city; not to like Stalin city; to write in an unusual literary style; to oppose the Aristotelian concepts of drama; to stick to the Aristotelian concepts of drama; to condemn phrases considered exemplary by reputable men and also vice-versa; to admit certain literary judgments; not to give a hoot for certain literary judgments, etc., etc., etc. Who would deny that not so long ago, many of these things were strongly forbidden, and under threat of heavy punishment, at least in actual practice, and that

even today, they are tolerated rather than simply and squarely free, as other acts.

"It is just this freedom to which we writers must stick through thick and thin. . . ."

But when the Revolution was crushed beneath the treads of Russian tanks, most of the writers remained faithful nonetheless to the revolutionary unity of the nation, to theirs and the nation's aspirations for freedom. Many of the writers were sentenced, imprisoned, put into insane asylums; some, more fortunate, were able to escape to the free world. The others, denied the weapon of the word by the Kadar-Soviet repression, continue the revolution in their own way, by silence and non-cooperation.

THIS HANDFUL of stories is an introduction to the literature of Hungary during the years 1954 to 1956. These are not propaganda stories, but they have been chosen out of the small number of genuine stories that managed somehow to be written truly and to evade the censorship. Some are by Communist or fellow-traveller authors, and because of this, are perhaps even more significant than they might otherwise be. The stories themselves are uneven in quality and from different genres; the Dery stories are of the highest artistic merit, political and human in the truest sense of both words; the Gyarfás story, on the other hand, is a popular humorous satire; the Santha story is a stripped-down folk tale; and the Pal Szabo piece is more a personal reminiscence than a story. They are devoted to many differing themes: to fathers who return from jail after seven years of "political" imprisonment; to sons who never return from

capture in the Soviet Union; to a moment of bliss bought by three shocks of straw for a mattress; to petty Party officials in a small town depleting the treasury and making mockery of Communist "hero" policy; to a Communist factory official who also is a decent man and is therefore driven into illness and despair by the role Communist society forces him to take. Deliberately sometimes and often accidentally, the stories tell of a life where food and clothing are scanty, where housing is so crowded that three families live in one four-room apartment and share a single bath and kitchen, and where over everything hangs the pall of totalitarian tyranny.

The stories by Tamasi, on the other hand, are quite different both in language and subject matter. They are in one of the oldest East European forms, the peasant parable or folk allegory. "Old Man December," for example, is a gentle satire of Communist violation of legal and natural order. "Flashes in the Night" is a carefully-wrought story modelled on the Biblical rendering of Joseph, Mary and the Christ-child. Deliberately set in 1944 as a means of evading the Communist censorship of 1956, the story is imbued with Tamasi's genuine religious feeling, almost awe, of the peasant life in Hungary, a life that continues to be lived in spite of any and all kinds of oppression.

These stories tell more about the feeling of life under Communism than a dozen political or economic studies. In reading them, one gets the life itself, the life of a human being enduring tyranny, as it was beautifully created by one of Hungary's finest living poets, the rebellious Gyula Illyes, whose poem "Tyranny" may yet prove to be the inscription on the tombstone of Communism in Hungary:

Tyranny is in each kiss of parting also,
In the question each wife asks daily:

When will you be back, darling?
This is tyranny—
Whether in confessions of prisoners
Or the confessions of lovers,
In the words that should be soft, half-spoken,
Tyranny is the fly in the wine-glass;
Not in your day and night-dreams only,
Not in the bride-bed only,
But in the yearning, the wanting even,
And in beauty and love even—
Because tyranny has been there before you.
Love, your love, has been ravished.
Tyranny is there when you lie down together.
It is the darkness in your throat.
Tyranny is in your food, your drink,
Tyranny is in your mouth, your nose,
You smell it, taste it, warm or cold,
Indoors or out, by night or day.
Where there is tyranny
There is tyranny only
And all is vain—
Great art or this true litany.
And when your grave is dug,
When your body is lowered,
It states who you were,
It makes use of your ashes.

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