

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

On my first visit to Hungary, in 1972, I was accompanied everywhere by Julia Kada, a woman in her late 20's, who had been assigned to me by the Magyar Poets, Essayists, and Novelists, the Magyar PEN Club. She was then a recent graduate student in Anglo-American Literature. She is a first-rate English speaker and a lover of literature. I was full of innocent queries about Budapest, its architecture and history, and some of them may well have been embarrassing or even unfair. She often answered with a deprecatory giggle, "I've already told you: this is a comic operetta country from the early ice cream age!" Probably this young woman from a working class background was using that tag from some nightclub satirist to avoid any comparisons between her tiny nation of ten millions and what she thought an American poet stood for as the representative of a massive, serious and advanced efficiency — our nation of over two hundred fifty million . . . and a world language. Still, the Magyar poets are neither frivolous nor lightweights. And poetry was our task: every day for three hard hours during most of that month of July. Hungarian poetry is rooted in a complex social and political history reaching back about a thousand years. A history difficult for someone from the Western Hemisphere to grasp, and one that remains baffling and problematic for the Hungarians themselves.

What had taken me to Hungary? Chance. I had long hankered after the poems of Endre Ady and Attila Jozsef; but the language, not being Indo-European, is impenetrable, one feels, without prolonged study and residence in Hungary. And of course, there were "the events of 1956," as they are referred to today. The uprising had caused a certain amount of excitement among some poets here, and there were suddenly poets-in-exile among us. I had written my only sestina, "Budapest, 1956," in response to those fearful days of October and November 1956. (It appears in my first book of poems, *Whatever Love Declares*, and in translation into Hungarian, in *Gloria Victis*, a volume that gathered the poems written in many languages about the uprising.) I had also been sent a dozen or so poems by one of the emigre poets, and with the help of a student at UCLA, I had translated them in 1962-63. (They appeared in *From the Hungarian Revolution*, edited by David Ray, Cornell University Press, 1966.) Then, in September of 1971, I spoke at the 38th International PEN Congress in Dublin. At the end of that week, and after the banquet in the hall of the National Library, I found myself carried off to my friend Anthony Kerrigan's flat in Fitzwilliam Square, where a small group continued the party. Among those guests was Laszlo Kery, head of the English Department at Budapest University. There was talk until the small hours. To resolve our questions, Kery challenged us to visit

Budapest and see for ourselves whether or not poetry lives there in our time. Neither Kerrigan nor I knew how that should be made possible. Kery was, however, unfazed: "I'll invite you myself!" he smiled. And lo! six months later an invitation for a month's stay in Hungary arrived in my mail. It turned out that that strong and good man, an expert in English literature, was also the General Secretary of the Magyar PEN, editor of its *Hungarian PEN Magazine*, and also of *Nagyvilág* ("Wide World"), a journal that translates fiction, poetry and criticism from many languages into Hungarian.

At that time I was unaware of the program that Kery headed, one which invites American, English and Canadian poets as well as French and German writers to Hungary to work at bringing the Magyar poets to the attention of the world outside. The Hungarians are painfully conscious that their literature is hidden by the peculiarity of their tongue. And, being enamored of their language and proud of the poetry that has been made over the last century and a half, they support a regular translation program. They have always been a very proud people; their situation in Central Europe has been labile for centuries; and their history is a tapestry shot through with error and tragedy: the results of which are that there seem to be as many Hungarians living dispersed through the world as there are within their borders. Their language and their poetry unites them, however; their difficulties and their many defeats have only served to make them the more proud, rendering their spirit complex and ironic.

I worked during that July of 1972 on several of the poets in this collection. I visited Budapest again in November of 1974 to read some of my own poems at the Magyar PEN, and took another batch of manuscripts back to Los Angeles with me. In July of 1977, I was invited for yet another month's work. Kery and Miss Kada once again arranged meetings, Sunday visits in the countryside round about Budapest, dinners, parties, and so forth, so that I could meet other poets, hear their voices, and get a rudimentary sense of their conversation, their persons, their "styles." They were all most hospitable, and of course interested in having their work published in English. Most of them have some English, as well as French, German, or Italian, so it wasn't always necessary for Julia Kada to act as an interpreter, which she did superbly in any case.

I visited in April of 1979, and again in May, when I was pleasantly surprised. Invited for what I thought was a poetry-reading session at the PEN headquarters on Vorosmarty Square, I found a more than a dozen poets waiting — but they had come for my sake this time. I was presented with the Hungarian PEN Club Memorial Medal, the first American writer to be so honored, for my translations, which include two books: *The Magician's Garden: 24 Stories* by Geza Csath (d. 1919), published in 1980 by Columbia

University Press (republished in 1983 in paperback as *Opium*, by Viking Penguin), as well as *Under Gemini: The Selected Poems of Miklos Radnoti*, published in 1985 by Ohio University Press. I was a guest of the Magyar PEN yet again in December of 1983.

The Hungarian poets have long been a guild of great translators from many languages into Hungarian: small nations with high literacy, an achieved literature, and a large stake in European culture always take in a great deal more than Americans care to, for whom neither sophistication nor international currents of thought, nor for that matter a love of poetry, seem to matter, so far as the life of the mind is concerned. But (among educated people) in Budapest, ideas and their literary expression are the rule, not the exception. Because of the country's compactness, and its people's ear for music and language, everything gets turned into Magyar: poesis is a living property of their tongue. In short, there is still magic in the speaking of the language. There had even been discussion in 1972 over the use of the word "Metro" for the new subway line being dug: Metro is a foreign word. It was going to be allowed only because the first, short subway line built in Pest in the 1890s was called "Metro" after the one in Paris. The liveliness of the debate was only partly chauvinistic; unlike the French, they are not lexically dictated to by an Academy. Rather, it's a question of how to transform all things foreign into Magyar, as best suits their unique linguistic situation.

At any rate, in 1972 I began seriously working at translating. The work has gone on year by year, encouraged and aided by Laszlo Kery and the Magyar PEN Club. My method is the same used by most of the other poets travelling to Budapest: collaborative translation. The challenge is to make poems in English. Obviously, the wise decision Kery made stems from his recognition that poets ought to do this job, not people who don't write poetry professionally in their own language. My goal is to be accurate in conveying the content, that is, the meaning of my original, and also to be true to the form as well as the tone and rhythm of the thought. To say what the poet says, but in English. I have worked with two people intensely devoted to their Magyar poets, Julia Kada and Maria Korosy, and for a few poems with Sara Liptai also. I have also worked with that most knowledgeable and supersubtle editor, Miklos Vajda, the Literary Editor of the *New Hungarian Quarterly*, an English-language journal.

My method is simple: I ask for the original to be set down, and I ask for a word-by-word translation to be placed beneath, or beside it. And I mean precisely that — word-by-word in the original syntax, so that I can get a sense of the way things are said in Hungarian, without that veiling that begins with the mediation of a syntax rearranged to look English. Then, I query the connotations, symbols, metaphors and similes, their weight and

force; etymology, antonyms, proverbs, slang, colloquialisms, down to the single noun, verb, adjective. It takes time: hours have passed over a phrase. Hungarian, being an agglutinative language, if that's the correct linguistic term, presents the English speaker with formidable structures, what becomes a whole stack of English words packed into one very long, strange, or obscure Magyar expression. Sometimes the "polyword" seems exotically primitive. Then I set about seeking a way to say it as we would say it in English, or rather American (for my translations, when compared with English and Canadian translations, are obviously American). I try to find our equivalents, parallels, associations, and so on. I freely admit that beyond my occasional recourse to a dictionary (the Hungarian-English one by Laszlo Orszagh), and my use of the thesaurus and an encyclopedia, I rely on the unconscious, or wherever inspiration comes from. Often, it evolves from my memory of the poet's speech. Sometimes there is serendipity; sometimes there is an ESP effect (or cause?) — it seems like what ESP would be were you "hearing" an alien, some envoy from beyond the Magellanic Clouds who is sending his thoughts into your mind, in English yet! One rule I try to observe: my lines repeat the poet's, my stanzas follow the poet's. When a poem is metered and rhymed, my rhyme scheme and meter try to follow suit. Rhyme-pattern is manageable; metric discrepancies will be inherent in the difference between Hungarian and English stress and cadence. Not as much as all that however, since Hungarian prosody is also quantitative. Were the original poems en face in this book the reader would recognize their similarity by their layout on the page.

Robert Frost said, Poetry is what gets lost in translation. That is so, as long as one thinks of poetry as the invisible, ineffable element of the poem's being, the way the "genius of the language" manifests itself to the native speaker. However, I assume that there are usually some equivalents in our different cultures, some similar developments in the self in the greater history of the Western culture. Hungary assures us of that: though it is Central European, it is a stubbornly westward-oriented nation. The world of the Hungarian Folk may be elsewhere, as it probably is for peasants in France. Hungarian, that is, is scarcely as alien as Japanese, Eskimo, Zulu, Urdu, or anywhere else outside Europe and the Western Hemisphere for that matter. Translation is not therefore impossible, or so it seems to me. What I hope is that both the qualities and the variety of my poets come through in my versions. I hope that even some measurable trace of "the poetry" may be found too. I have been told by Vajda and by Istvan Vas that some of my Englished poems have turned out better poems: and when Vas wrote me this he was speaking of one of his own poems. If they say it, it may even be so. At least such generous criticism encourages me to imagine that I am offering

not merely satisfactory but good things. If the reader feels that he or she has met these friends of mine from Hungary through these poems, then I shall be reassured. I only wish I could have done more of their work, for some of the writers here are copious and grand poets. And there are many whom I have not yet had the opportunity to bring into English. The good thing is that there are others also doing this work today: one hopes that the Magyar PEN may continue its effort, and that our acquaintance with Hungarian poetry will be augmented year by year. For sheer intelligence, wit, bravura and nobility, there are few contemporary equals. The Hungarians offer us an astonishing range of forms, great and imaginative lessons in metaphoric power, and above all, the vivid expression of fascinating personalities.

Jascha Kessler

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