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Background Report

Hungarian Unit

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SOVIET CONCENTRATION CAMP STIRS HUNGARIANS

Two works on Soviet concentration camps published recently in Hungary have been becoming the focus of widespread interest and discussion in that country. The one is Solzhenitsin's short novel "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich"; the other, by Jozsef Lengyel, the Hungarian writer recently honored with the Kenneth Prize, is entitled "From the Beginning to the End". [See Background Report "The Hungarian 'Solzhenitsin' Speaks Up", of 26 March 1961.]

Solzhenitsin's novel was given relatively broad publicity. Using a rough translation, provincial papers immediately began publishing it in installments; "Magyvilag", a periodical devoted to world literature, printed it, and a 10,000-copy edition in book form was put out by the Europe Publishing House. Lengyel's work, on the other hand, appeared only in the literary periodical "Uj Iras", whose total circulation is between 6,000 and 8,000.

There are people who are watching uneasily the extremely lively interest which has been aroused by both works, as well as the mood which is developing under its impact. This is evident, for example, in an article by Lejos Galambos, a courageous and talented young Communist prose writer. The article, entitled "I Protest", appeared in the March issue of the literary periodical "Kortars", and it condemns the "hypocritical mood" developed around "camp literature", i.e. Solzhenitsin's novel, which the Hungarian press itself had encouraged.

The Man on the Street Talks About Solzhenitsin's Novel

Galambos writes:

"One goes to the harbor and notices that the customers are up to their ears in the latest issue of 'Magyvilag'. What is the meaning of this? Is there really so much thirst for literature in the country?"

"Up to now I have never seen them reading anything else but the fashion magazines or the sports column. Shouldn't one be glad that we have arrived at this stage?"

"But then one goes to the market, and the vegetable woman relates, with the intimacy a good customer deserves, hair-raising details of the recently published novel which I did not see anywhere when I read it. In this great interest, then, addressed to literature?

"We have to face things as they are. No, the great interest is unfortunately not literary. It is interest for things which smell bad, which smell of scandal. And I am sorry, but my whole being protests against this hysterical mood. Because, yes, it is true that such a mood has developed, and it is swelling, expanding and growing until it obliterates all other topics in daily encounters. A shiver goes through people, accompanied by cynical nods of the heads and by sidelong glances, as if some racy bedroom story had been told among good friends who heard it from a well-informed person. Now the shivers are whispering, to whom nothing is dear, who told in advance which cards had to be drawn: and see! they were right.

"But is this really so, and should I not control my feelings? An occasion presents itself in connection with a trip to the countryside. I talked with the county president, the Party secretary, a tractor driver, an electrician, a teacher, a journalist and an engineer, and I found all these people in the midst of reading "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich". What were the opinions? Thoughtfully in agreement, cynical, malicious, skeptical, pseudo-objective, passionately protesting or the opposite, unmistakable signs about the similarities between fascist camps and the forced labor camps described in the previously mentioned book."

Galambos stated that his protest was not aimed against the literary merits of the book. He has no excuse for the illegalities committed. This book and others with similar subjects have to be published, but the attitude of the press is reprehensible when it conducts exaggerated propaganda as, for example, in the case of Solzhenitsin's work.

Heated Debate on Leagzel's Short Novel

Already last autumn an interesting discussion was published in the paper of the Association of Hungarian Writers, "Let us Irredelod". The subject under discussion was: Is there or is there not a need for books revealing the errors, contradictions and distortions of the years of the personality cult? What is the task of literature in this respect, and how should these books be "orchestrated"?

After the publication of Jozsef Leagzel's short novel

on the Soviet concentration camps, the debate gained new impetus, and it continued in a rather sharp tone. This was started by an article in "Magyar Hírlap", the daily of the Patriotic Front. On 17 February 1963, the paper's Reporter on Foreign Politics, Tamas Zala, wrote an article in which he attacked Jozsef Lengyel.(x) Only the Soviet Union itself -- he stated -- could give us "a psychologically and historically authentic analysis" of the Soviet concentration camps. He writes:

Are personal experiences and a writer's talent for portraying them enough to enable someone to tell the truth about the consequences of the personality cult? Is something more not needed, something which only those people possess whose life and mentality are rooted in the Soviet soil? Is a life transplanted there capable of absorbing and reflecting all those historical traditions, this wealth of society and the mysteries of the people's soul, which taken together provide an explanation for the extremely complicated symptoms of the cult of personality and for the fact that it could influence Soviet life for a comparatively long period? I think that Togliatti was right when he said that the ultimate truth in the Stalin question had to be reached in the Soviet Union. This does not mean that it is forbidden to talk about it everywhere else; after all, arbitrariness did not spare the international workers' movement either. I do think, however, that we cannot expect a historically and psychologically authentic analysis from any country other than the Soviet Union. And this statement is equally valid for artistic works and historical science.

According to the writer Lengyel's novel provides an opportunity for distortion of the truth and optical illusions. In Lengyel's book "bestial persons, disgusting worms" whirl about in a "rigid, cold moon area". The hero, who is released from the concentration camp, "also finds a camp outside it" and "meets former prisoners who long to return from the hell outside to the one behind bars, because there, at least, they have bread". According to the critic, the book is a distortion, and no good will come of it. "Justice must be administered in the Stalin issue in such a way that in the people's minds socialism is not identified with violations of law".

According to reports, Zala's negative criticism produced a general shock, and a reply was not long in coming. Six days after the publication of the Zala article, the first attack on him and a defense of Lengyel appeared in "What an Irredelion". It was written by Sandor Tataby, a prominent prose writer and journalist, who formerly belonged to the group of Togliatti writers. The second and very sharp reply to Zala's article

(x) See Hungarian Press Survey, No. 1293 of 21 February 1963.

also appeared in "Tisztos Iradalom", in its March 16 issue, and was written by no less a person than the veteran Gyula Hevesi, a member of the CP, a Kossuth Prize-holder of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and its vice-president. The sharp tone of the rebuke is shown by the following excerpt:

Sala's criticism is a strong reminder of the methods of literary criticism employed in the heyday of the personality cult, in which by means of all kinds of irrelevant talk or wandering thought, totally unjustified insinuations were attributed to the writer, by which the writer rather than the writing was vilified... On what grounds does Sala doubt the authenticity of Lengyel's ascription of the "moon" area -- which, unfortunately, was not on the moon but on an area of the earth --? Assuming that I do not doubt the honesty of the critic, the grounds for his statement can be found in the fact that it is difficult to believe what seems to be unbelievable and difficult to imagine what is beyond the imagination unless one has lived through it. On the other hand, those people like Gyorgy Bakovics, who were fortunate enough to stay alive amidst all the innumerable hazards -- which has been so excellently described by Solzhenitsin -- and came back from the "moon" to the earth's surface, will find no distorting lenses or optical illusions in the portrait given by Lengyel, which exaggerates nothing but perhaps approaches better than does Solzhenitsin's the "average of many years"...

I was shocked and started to think deeply while reading Sala's article, because there is no reason why I should doubt the political good-will and intentions of the author. Apparently, however, there are people obsessed by the idea -- and who even put it down in writing -- that the roots of the Stalinist personality cult have to be sought in the mind of the Soviet people, in the historical traditions of the Soviet people and in the wealth of Soviet society, and there still exists a printing press with printer's ink that does not blink when it turns out such a text in several thousands of copies. I often had a chance to debate with people with various political attitudes, who, lacking personal experience and remote from the events, tried to find some explanation how the cult of personality could have gained ground and why it had so long-lasting an effect. I encountered several wrong interpretations, but this is the first time that I have heard that the explanation of the origin of the personality cult lies in the "mysteries of the Soviet people's mind" and -- at least in part -- in Soviet historical traditions. At the time of our own personality cult, Sala's abortive article could easily have resulted in the author's being given a direct "briefing" -- not only seen by his eyes but perhaps felt by other parts of his

body as well -- and this would show clearly that the roots of the Rakosi brand of personality cult are to be sought as little in the mysteries of the Hungarian heart, as the roots of the Stalinist cult of personality can be found in the mind of the Russian people and their historical tradition.

The extensive interest in "camp literature" and the literary dispute about it are features noteworthy of the Hungarian literary scene and the public mood in general.

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