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HUNGARIAN LITERATURE IN THE FIRST QUARTER OF 1965

"The ideal has moved into villas and automobiles..."(1) These bitter words were uttered by a young Hungarian author in his very first play. Does this indicate that the ideal, the Communist ideal, has also faded from Hungarian literature? This question is justifiably asked by everyone who has read the guiding principles of the CC of the NSWP on some timely ideological tasks,(2) submitted to the CC meeting of 11 March 1965. The guiding principles go deeply into the question of literature. The diagnosis is masochistically sincere; the therapy, although uncertain, unimaginative and confused, reflects the words of Jozsef Rovai, the cultural apostle of Ekkoz: "The writers should not regard themselves as ideologically infallible and should accept the Party's advice."

What is actually going on in literature? How are the power relations developing in the triangle of Party-literature-public opinion? The purpose of this report is to discuss some of the problems pertaining to this complex question.

If literature is treated leniently, it gets out of hand, if, on the other hand, it is handled with an iron fist, it is killed.

1) Gyula Csasz: "Peace to the Criminals," *KOZLEKES*, January 1965.

2) cf. The Hungarian Party's "Ideological Guidelines," *KEPA* Background Report, 11.4.1965.

After the period of retaliation after 1956, the cultural policy of the HSNP began to show a definite trend toward leniency. The Central Committee Report submitted to the 1959 Party Congress was still chastising the writers who failed to keep in step with progress: "The people expect a clear-cut declaration of colors on the part of every writer and artist as to their stand in the class struggle."

But at the 1962 Party Congress nothing of this kind was said. The congressional report accepted with resignation the fact that literary and artistic life consisted of groups adhering to various ideological trends. The report declared that no "administrative measures" would be applied and even went as far as to state that socialist realism covered freedom of experimentation, the justification of different stylistic trends as well as a diversity of topics and forms.

To crown all this, Partalat, the Central Committee's periodical published a statement in 1964 according to which:(3)

- everybody is allowed to publish his work, the past does not count;
- books which although not socialist, are not hostile, can be published;
- the value of literary works does not depend on whether their author is a Communist or non-Communist;
- literary talent and Communist convictions do not necessarily go together;
- ideological influence is needed instead of the application of administrative methods;
- writers must have the right to criticize.

This very lenient literary policy was also reflected in literary life itself.

However, simultaneously with this development, certain

3) Istvan Kiss: "On the Literary Situation," Partalat, April 1964, Hungarian Press Survey, No.1437.

other tendencies were also apparent. A long list of persons could be drawn up who took a stand against "liberalization" and announced an ideological offensive on the basis of Marxism-Leninism. Perhaps the most notable of these people were Istvan Szirmai, Politburo member, OS secretary, head of Agitprop and president of the Free Council. Szirmai is a Communist intellectual who has slowly but steadily assumed the mantle of Neval. In an address given in spring 1963 at the Political Academy of the KMT he strongly attacked the writers who were captivated with the harmful slogan of "liberalization" and with the false illusion of "oppositionalism." Szirmai objected to the fact that "some literary groups interpreted our literary policy according to their own ideas..." He said that "we cannot be peaceful onlookers in literature... what we need are fine filters." (4)

Gyula Kallai, Politburo member and deputy premier. He is one of the most educated members of the group around Kadar. In an interview given to a correspondent of Pravda, a monthly periodical of the Czechoslovak Writers' Union, he took a stand for the application also in literature of Kadar's slogan that "those who are not against us, are with us." At the same time, he also said that: "Party organizations, too, are dealing with ideological mistakes and errors, but it is better if the authors, creators, publishers and the Writers' Association themselves disclose the ideological weaknesses... It is our duty... in literature just as in other fields, to put an end to hostile political stunts with administrative means, if this proves to be necessary." (5)

Pál Tilly, former teacher, political general, now Minister of Education. In February 1964 he urged measures improving the state guidance of culture: "One of the conditions for improving state control is that the commanding positions where the publication of works is decided be filled by Marxist cultural politicians with correct aesthetic as well as political judgment." (6)

4) Kezvezetseg, 30.3.1963

5) Kultura, December 1963, Hungarian Press Survey No.1413

6) Kezvezetseg, 2.2.1964, Hungarian Press Survey No.1428

Georgy Lozki, first deputy Minister of Culture emphasized, only one year later, the necessity for administrative measures: "Also needed are some administrative measures; first of all the more expedient application and more careful and stricter control of prizes and other incentives." (7)

This list is far from being complete. It shows, however, that for many months voices were being raised urging that the slide toward "liberalization" in literature be checked. These have culminated in what might be termed the regime's ideological counter-offensive in 1963, the most important evidence of which was the Party Central Committee meeting of 21 March 1963 which approved the ideological guidelines and which heard a speech by Levvan Scirman explaining and amplifying them.

Both the Central Committee guidelines and the speech by Scirman showed the dilemma which the regime was facing. It obviously wishes to bring literature under tighter control and is prepared to take some administrative measures to try to ensure this: Scirman, for example, announced that the composition of the editorial boards of some magazines had been changed and the whole character of the magazine changed. But, still, the regime knows that too much coercion would only backfire and destroy the relatively favorable image it has built up both at home and abroad.

Literature that Worries the Regime

What kind of literature is it that has been worrying the regime? Before giving examples of it, it is perhaps necessary to repeat the old truism that the sense of mission, of involvement and of opposition has always been very strong among Hungarian writers.

This did not end with the Gleichschaltung after 1946. It was only submerged and reappeared explosively in 1953 and 1956. It is reappearing again in a different form and in different circumstances.

7) Veszprémi Hírlap, 25.2.1963

After the revolution a new generation of writers entered on the literary scene. Many of them are Communists but many of them, the pampered children of the Kadar regime, seem to have become aware of the responsibilities which their literary gifts have placed upon them. Their literary conscience has become more important to them than any notion of "Party-post." Thus, in addition to the older and middle-aged generation, most of the young generation of writers are now becoming a headache for the regime.

An ever-growing, bolder and experimental versatility is the chief characteristic of the new trend in Hungarian literature. According to Imre Szabo, a popular writer now living in London: "Compared to 1956 the difference is that, at that time, a rapidly growing political and social truthfulness was the main point. Now it is a slowly and massively growing human truthfulness." (8) One could add that in the meantime this sense of truth has spread from the purely personal to the political and social planes as well.

To illustrate this point, reference should be made to a young author, Gyula Csak. This writer's sociographical report, entitled, "Deep Sea Current," published in El Iras of May 1962, caused one of the biggest literary debates of recent years. In the preface to his first drama the author explained: "Inasmuch as I had to renounce the formulation of the final truths of our life, I did not wish to renounce the artistic truth and right of portraying reality the way I see it."

In his play Peace to the Criminals, published in the January 1963 edition of Kortárs, Csak showed that he had not changed his attitude. On the contrary, he seems to have become even bolder.

Here, for example, are some sentences taken from Peace to the Criminals:

- "The number of disillusioned Communists in Hungary would suffice to block up the Danube"

8) This statement was made at the 1962 Feldafing symposium of RFE Hungarian Broadcasting Department.

- "What a terrible thing that the revolution eats up its own children; this is a cruel law."
- "There is only one thing more cruel: if the children of the revolution devour the revolution. And this is what is happening now!"
- "My abilities do not make me suited for a so-called public figure. I lack the most important quality, i.e., to be able to pretend."
- "He went to a meeting; he said it was the meeting of the People's Front. He could just as well have said of dead ducks. It would have amounted to the same. Wouldn't it?"
- "What a line in front of the butcher's shop. Been so, I almost got no meat at all and what I got was really bad... Take the other leading comrades, they get export turkeys and geese delivered to the house for a song."
- "A new type of man is born. Just now I have encountered a true Bolshevik man of the world. What a glib tongue, what diplomacy!"
- "The human being is only dangerous as long as he has the shape of a human being."
- "Whenever the gentlemen and scoundrels in high positions quarrel with each other, their subordinates have to pay for it."

Many more such examples could be quoted from recent novels, short stories, sociogeographical reports, plays or journalistic pieces. In the Kármán times even the weather reports were censored, because an ice-cold wind could not blow from the Urals and for May 1 the Party permitted only bright sunshine. Today, there is a good deal of truthfulness in Hungarian literature, because, according to Peter Ferenc: "Telling lies is no longer worthwhile; not only our colleagues and readers, but also the 'big wigs' disbelieve them (thank God). Only some editors, publishers and critics pretend to believe lies." (9)

9) Kartag, November 1962.

Another characteristic of the new look in literature is that many writers penetrate very deeply beneath the surface. These seek the solution of problems on moral, rather than political, grounds. This is a dangerous tendency, because it raises the question of power and morals and the relations of individual and society. According to the Guiding Principles of the Hungarian Party, discussed at the meeting of 11 March 1963: "The number of works which set power and morals, the individual and society, literature and politics against each other have increased. Novels, dramas and essays prove that power is synonymous with terror and that those who have something to do with power cannot remain morally pure."

This subject is also dealt with in two dramas, "The Minion" and "The Eccentric," by Gyula Illyés, one of the outstanding figures of Hungarian contemporary literature. In the first play the author expressed his opinion on power against a nineteenth century setting, the second play -- also about power -- has an ancient Roman historical setting. The message of both plays is, however, very topical: a person in power cannot be moral and, vice versa, a moral person should not besmirch his morals by taking on power since morals and power are irreconcilable entities.

Another characteristic of contemporary literary life is its strong debating spirit. The number of debates which have been carried on in the columns of Hungarian newspapers and periodicals since 1958 is very close to the 100 mark. The topics are partly inspired and urged by the Party, but many of them are unwelcome. As István Szirmai put it in his speech to the Central Committee of 11 March 1963: "There are also discussions initiated by persons who are ideologically opposed to us. In such cases, we are put on the defensive willy-nilly -- at least temporarily. We have to admit that quite often the enemy is able to force its topics on us through well-meaning men." (10)

The list of subjects discussed is very wide ranging: sociology, culture, way of life, shortages, alienation, housing, hoodlums, populist writers, portrayal of peasants, economic

10) Szirmai István, April 1963, Hungarian Press Survey No.1596

management, drama-literature, etc. In addition, writers also contribute to discussions pursued on national problems or, if necessary, point up their stand by remaining silent. The most notable case of this happening was in the debate on populist writers in 1958. It was a discussion without the active participation of those concerned and, thus, ended in fiasco.

The progress and outcome of these discussions and debates are not always free of surprises. For example, the discussion on alienation toward the end of 1964 started in the misty regions of ideology. However, one of the contributors, Peter Varas -- a peasant who turned social-revolutionary, politician and writer -- brought the discussion down to earth. He confronted theory with reality and, to start with, examined the problem of alienation in the West "... if a statistician," said Varas, "were to examine the financial means of 'alienated' men in the West, it would turn out that they are not exactly small. The majority of these people have something to burn to in their alienation. They retire into their own little house or castle and to their respective 'hobbies.'" But what was the position at home in Hungary? "I believe that the alienation problem, which has become fashionable in the West, cannot be adapted to our country... In an article published last fall, I used the term 'indifference' to describe the apathy, lethargy and lack of interest displayed by a fairly large number of workers, including even persons who are attending evening courses in order to broaden their knowledge... In my view (this indifference) comes from dissatisfaction with the achievements and progress of socialist construction, with the prevalent housing conditions and with homelessness... Dissatisfaction is also caused by the present wage and working conditions; it includes the boredom of performing work without a feeling of vocation, just for the purpose of earning one's daily bread." (11) Such boldness is by no means atypical.

Contemporary Hungarian literature is influenced by various trends. The influence of the avant-gardist Soviet poets and authors is very important. More recently the literatures of Hungarian minorities as well as of other nations in the Danube basin have started to have a fertilizing effect. The growing

11) "A Letter" by Peter Varas, Kortárs, December 1964, Hungarian Press Survey No.1557

number of publications, summarizing and evaluating the literatures of neighboring countries only serve to accelerate this process.

But the strongest influence on Hungarian literature is exerted by the West. This corresponds to the traditions of Hungarian intellectual life which, in previous centuries, shaped and developed its literature in the wake of Western trends. Today, the gates of the West are wide open, and through them Western literature, although somewhat filtered, is pouring into the country. It is not surprising, therefore, that Magvillas, a periodical on world literature, is the most popular periodical in Hungary. It also has the largest circulation: 31,000 copies are printed of each issue.

The "International Bibliography of Translations," published regularly by Unesco, contains the list of Western books published in Hungarian. The increase in the number of translations is quite striking. The newest products on the book market will be an anthology of French and English plays, comprising the works, on the French side, of Salacrou, Sartre, Giraudoux, Cocteau, Ionesco-Alencu and Beckett, and on the English side, of John Osborne, John Arden, Arnold Wesker, Brendan Behan and John Mortimer. The Europa Publishing House in Budapest intends also to put out a volume of 23 Swedish short stories. It is also planned to publish a shortened version of Carl Sandburg's famous work on Abraham Lincoln. The Gondolat (Thought) Publishing House is also to publish a volume of essays and studies on 22 US authors. The names of Franz Kafka, Jean-Paul Sartre and Truman Capote also figure among recent publications.

There seems little doubt that the opportunities for the Hungarian public to read the best Western literature of all kinds will be maintained and will even be expanded.

This threat for Western literature is one facet of readers' habits which the regime's cultural officials must take into account. Another characteristic of readers' habits of which they are all too painfully aware is the complete lack of interest in any kind of official political literature. Mag Haza, the Party daily of County Vas, complained on 31 November 1954 that "in many places no attention whatsoever is paid to the distribution of the publications of the Kossuth Publishing House (the publisher

of the Party's propaganda material-Ed). In addition, publications requested by certain organizations are returned to the publisher without having been opened." What the readers do enjoy is the kind of "oppositional" type of writing which has been such a prominent feature of literature over the past two to three years. To quote another provincial daily: "... a slight oppositionalism is more effective than Party-mindedness. Publishers, theaters and the public 'bite into' a piece of writing more easily if, here and there, it strays from the newly defined path of literature and the arts... Before long we shall find opinions according to which Party-minded art is something to be ashamed of." (12)

It is precisely the public's appreciation of this "oppositional" type of literature which makes the regime's task so unenviable. The ideological conference in March this year was designed to counter this type of "oppositional" literature. Yet the reading public is in favor of it. This is just one of the reasons inhibiting the Kadar government from taking an oppressive stand against it. Severe coercion would create more problems than it would solve.

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12) Felcsaparszak, (County Szeged), 27 November 1954.