

# RADIO FREE EUROPE

Research

## EAST EUROPE

HUNGARY

6 March 1968

### INSIGHTS ON THE "DISCOVERY OF HUNGARY" MOVEMENT

#### Introduction

Translated below is the text of an article which appeared in Izvestia, the Soviet government newspaper, on 4 February 1968. Written by B. Rodionov, the paper's Budapest correspondent, the article describes in rather surprising detail and objectivity the origin and nature of the current, sharp debate concerning the "Discovery of Hungary" movement. The latter is a movement reminiscent of the "Village Explorers" of the 1930's, and in its contemporary form involves some 18 Hungarian writers who have been commissioned to write a series of sociographic essays on the realities of Hungarian village life. The first of these essays, written by Antal Vegh, exposed the misery and corruption prevalent in the village of Feneslek in Szabolcs-Szatmar County. The result of Vegh's daring expose is described by Rodionov.

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#### Search for Truth

It all began with one of the 580 inhabitants of the far-off village of Feneslek. The person in question, who works in town, came across the journal essay entitled "Stagnant Water," which is devoted to a description of this village. The author of the essay, who based his observations on the testimony of the inhabitants of Feneslek themselves, painted an exceedingly dreary picture of a village which time had passed by. It is one thing, of course, to complain about the faults of one's village in conversation and

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another to see these complaints published in a journal of the country's capital. Indeed, "Stagnant Water" aroused the ire not only of Feneeszék, but also of the district and the county. The Szabolcs Szentmar County newspaper published a series of "Counter-Reports" which were supposed to show "the other side of the coin." Moreover, when the people of the county heard that the writing of an essay for the "Discovery of Hungary" series concerning the life and people of the entire area had been entrusted to the very same author who had written "Stagnant Water" (the series is to coincide with the 15th anniversary of the liberation of the country), a veritable storm arose. The county refused to place its trust in Antal Vagh, who had worked for 10 years in this locality as a teacher.

The chairman of the Writers' Union, Jozsef Darvas, an enthusiast of the village essay, went to have a talk with the inhabitants of Szabolcs Szentmar County. (Darvas, incidentally, is the author of a book entitled The Biggest Hungarian Village, which was a sensation in its own time.) Explanations, however, were not forthcoming. The county leaders insisted that Antal Vagh did not want to talk, but to denounce, that the phenomena described by him were not typical and did not show the tendencies of development. Darvas, together with Antal Vagh and representatives from the county, then went to the village of Feneeszék itself. The writer subsequently described the thoughts which this trip had aroused in the pages of the literary journal Kortárs.

Darvas found the inhabitants of Feneeszék utterly insulted. "We are now ashamed to admit that we are from Feneeszék," said villagers working in town. "Because of this ill-fated writing we now find ourselves mentioned even in the broadcasts of Free Europe," the owners of radio receivers remarked in a grievous tone. The anger of the inhabitants of Feneeszék was directed not only against the writer, but also against individual villagers who had "gossiped" so much -- against the director of the school, who has given Feneeszék 78 years of his life, against the chairman of the village council, against the doctor and against the 10 year-old volunteer nurse. "Where was the description of Feneeszék more truthfully written," Darvas attempted to elicit from the young volunteer nurse, "in 'Stagnant Water' or in the reports of the county newspaper?" "In 'Stagnant Water,'" answered the young girl. "And which was more

helpful?" asked a comrade from the county. "That which was written by the county newspaper," the nurse said, embarrassed.

As a result, as they say in the rubric, of "returning to the scene of the crime," "the recorded facts were basically confirmed." Feneaszlak, even according to statistical data, is one of the most backward villages in the historically most backward county in Hungary. It is no accident that it has been named the "Sicily" of the country. After 1944 attempts to create cooperatives were rejected in Feneaszlak. The sons of peasants in this area have found jobs as auxiliary workers in town and come home only on their day off. The grandsons, who have studied in the local school, completely leave the village. And at a time when other villages, farming on the very same kind of sandy soil, were beginning to improve that soil to the degree that they had consolidated their cooperatives, and had begun to create gardens and, with the aid of the state, plant trees, in Feneaszlak everything remained as before.

Everything? No, naturally not everything. The village has acquired electricity; it has a completely modern school building (in which, it is true, there is a chronic lack of teachers), and it has a kindergarten and a medical center. Moreover, all 78 families, who had lived for decades in earth huts, have moved into proper homes, albeit without the facilities available in urban dwellings. One should also have written about this, said Darvas in agreement with the inhabitants of Feneaszlak. One should have reviewed the entire experience of the past quarter century, with both its successes and its failures.

However, Darvas continued, compared to the tempo of development of the Hungarian village as a whole, the progress of Feneaszlak is equivalent to having marked time in one place. Actually, the picture is even worse, for progress of this nature means that the backwardness of Feneaszlak and "untypical" villages similar to it will only grow until a way is found to break out of this vicious circle. Antal Vagh suggested that a "government comissar" be sent to such villages. Darvas searches for another way. It is necessary, in his opinion, to arouse the village (and Vagh's essay, with all its extremes, can be the starting point). It is necessary to awaken the people from their slumber to activity and to put into practice genuine socialist democracy. János Darvas appeals to the young intelligentsia,

to the students of the Pedagogical Institute and to KISZ. Just as a man needs air, Pecsélek needs the strength of its youth, young teachers with initiative and young cultural workers. Take away Pecsélek's patronage and bring to it contemporary socialist civilization. Figuratively speaking, this is Hungary's virgin land!

Darvas directs his basic polemical blow against the "conformists," people who have made comfortable arrangements in the county or district center or even in Pecsélek itself, and who have once and for all explained away all of the existing faults and troubles by objective historical reasons. Darvas repeats a thought which is very popular now among Party publicists in Hungary: "It is necessary for us Communists to be able to view ourselves critically in order that we never yield to self-complacency . . ."

This affair was not ended by its publication in Kortárs, which, by the way, is very characteristic of contemporary Hungarian life. The editorial board of the central Party newspaper, Magyarbádog, convened a round table of Party workers, writers and publicists. Here the question was posed in a general way, as one of the principles -- that is, as a question about the objectivity and partialness of the writer's view of life.

"The better the political leader, the more he is able to derive lessons from a literary work like Vagh's essay," stated Jozsef Darvas. "This is because a politician can discover in such literature something which he frequently cannot discover by other means."

"In documentary literature, we want to discover ourselves; we want our historical achievements, with all of their difficulties and mistakes, to be disclosed; we want literature to inspire people to achieve new successes." This was said by Ferenc Gross, First Secretary of the Szabolcs Szatmar County Party Committee, a man who comes from a poor peasant's family with many children, and an old friend and opponent of Darvas. "This task can in no way be fulfilled," he said, "if the writer operates from a position of 'opposition.'"

Writer Antal Vagh said:

I know that Pecsélek is by far not the entire county, and therefore in my future book I wish

to also show such villages as Valja, where they have constructed a wonderful house of culture for two million forint and where the cooperative member earns up to 100 forint a day. I want to write this book very honestly, devoting it to the 10th anniversary of the liberation of our homeland.

Evaluating the results of the discussion, the editor-in-chief of the newspaper, János Gostonyi, remarked:

People who are the immediate possessors of power are able to achieve a lot in their work, but that which writers write and publish . . . is also power, and a not insignificant power which can be used for good and for evil. Consequently, we are talking about our general responsibility.

The first volumes of the "Discovery of Hungary" series (altogether there will be more than 20) are now in process. Born in fruitful discussions, in an atmosphere of involvement, of creative enthusiasm and civic responsibility, these small tomes cannot but render genuine literary aid to the cause of the people and the nation. This will be neither malicious slander nor the rosy idyll of the album keepers, i.e., something published "by accident."

Jozsef Barvas, carried away by the conflict in Fenecslek and hot on the scent, wrote a play which was very quickly put on the stage at the National Theater in Miskolc, which borders Szabolcs Szatmar County. In the discussion of the performance, in which eminent critics, dramatists, Party workers and, last but not least, guests from Szabolcs Szatmar, took part, it was said that the debate had shaken people up and had forced them to look around. Can we not also find such comfortable conformity among ourselves? Have we not also become excessively accustomed to "subjective reasons" in our own institutions? [S. Rodionov]

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