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GOING WEST

Emily A. Schultz

I. Forking Paths

One evening during the last week of our seminar, László Magács and some of his colleagues from the Merlin Theater in Budapest treated us to a dramatic reading of selected short stories by István Örkény, a twentieth-century Hungarian writer. One of these stories, "Public Opinion Survey," quotes from an imaginary questionnaire supposedly administered to the Hungarian people. Asked their opinions of the current regime, respondents are given four choices: the first three are bland and uninformative, while the fourth is blunt: "I want to move to Vienna."¹ Örkény's bitterly comic observation was written during the period of communist domination, but the Hungarian artists who read it to us insisted that it was equally insightful about Hungarian attitudes in the current, postcommunist "transition."

The particularities of the Hungarian transition stimulated my ethnographic curiosity. The Hungarians we met clearly felt themselves to be standing on the threshold of a new way of being Hungarian. What did this mean? They had repudiated their postwar ties to the East. Would they now simply return to an older way of being Hungarian (i.e., being Western European) that had been snatched from them? But the West had not welcomed them home with a generous Marshall Plan for economic recovery. Did this mean that their status as "genuine" Western Europeans was somehow in question? Adding to the confusion, Ivan Vejvoda reminded us that some Hungarians believe that nothing significant changed in 1989, and that the "reformers" are simply the old ruling class (or their technocrat sons and

daughters), who have found a new ideology to justify their retention of power and wealth.

My three weeks in Hungary taught me that Hungarian ambivalence about Western Europe, represented most powerfully by the former capital of the Hapsburg Empire, is centuries old. The Hungarian "transition" to full-fledged membership in Western Europe seems equally old. Throughout their brilliant, complex, and frequently tragic history, Hungarians seem to be caught in a recurrent nightmare: like passengers in a high-speed train whose track is blocked by endless obstacles, their triumphant arrival in Vienna seems forever delayed.

The Hungarian predicament is strikingly illustrated in the career of Count István Széchenyi, one of Hungary's greatest national heroes. A new visitor to Budapest quickly learns that Count Széchenyi was a wealthy landed aristocrat who founded the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1825 and was responsible for the construction of Budapest's famous Chain Bridge across the Danube in the 1840s. Widely traveled and interested in new ideas, he worked to achieve capitalistic economic reforms that would promote industry and trade with Western Europe. In contrast with contemporaries such as Lajos Kossuth, who saw independence from Hapsburg rule as a precondition for Hungarian development, Széchenyi envisaged a developmental process for Hungary within the empire, led by enlightened aristocrats such as himself. Indeed, following the collapse of the Hungarian revolution in 1849, a version of Széchenyi's model eventually triumphed: the Compromise of 1867 created the dual Austro-Hungarian monarchy and ushered in the decades of prosperity that Budapest enjoyed prior to World War I. Széchenyi himself was not around to experience this dazzling success, however. Having suffered a nervous breakdown in 1848, he committed suicide in 1860.

Why did the life of a Hungarian national hero of extraordinary accomplishment end in suicide? Count Széchenyi surely had personal reasons for taking his own life, but nearly every speaker reminded us that Hungary still has the highest suicide rate in Central Europe. At the end of the nineteenth century, Budapest was one of the most prosperous, vibrant, sophisticated cities in Europe; its subway system, the first in continental Europe, celebrated its one-hundredth birthday in 1994. Why,

therefore, are Hungarians in 1995 still “in transition”? Why this repeated failure to achieve and sustain what once appeared to be a foregone and fully Western destiny, comparable to the destiny of Vienna?

Some would explain Hungary’s fate as the result of powerful outside forces. One of the Hungarians we met observed that Hungary had been a colony since 1526, when its armies were defeated by the Turks at the battle of Mohács. Turkish domination was replaced in 1699 by Hapsburg domination, which prevailed until the end of World War I. The brief period of independence between World War I and World War II ended with the Nazi occupation in 1944, followed shortly thereafter by Soviet domination. For more than 450 years, in this view, Hungarians have been reduced to playing peripheral roles in the grand designs of outsiders. This history of domination has to do with geography as well. After all, Hungary (together with the rest of Central Europe north of the Balkans) lies primarily on an open plain between two great landmasses, making it perennially vulnerable to the political ambitions of more powerful neighbors. But it seems clear that Hungary’s fate has also been a consequence of the failure of political judgment at crucial historical moments. Lajos Kossuth is said to have argued that forming an alliance with Austria, rather than with other non-Austrian nationalities within the empire, would be suicidal for Hungary,² a position echoed in the remarks of Rudolf Andorka. Yet the Compromise of 1867 formalized just such an alliance. Hungary’s special status meant that Budapest would inevitably be punished together with Vienna when the empire fell after World War I. That punishment — the loss of territory to neighboring states at the postwar Treaty of Trianon — seems clearly to have tempted some of the next generation of Hungarian leaders to side with fascists who promised to return these lands to Hungary, with further devastating consequences for the country at the end of World War II.

And what about the period since 1989? More than one speaker claimed that the Hungarian people had grown lazy and dependent under the debt-financed “goulash communism” of the Kádár years, and that the “shock therapy” of the “transition” was necessary to bring them to their senses and make hard-working, responsible citizens of them. Ivan Vejvoda suggested,

however, that this interpretation overlooks the way János Kádár's policy used Western funds as a political tool to help undermine Soviet rule. Péter Ákos Bod, an economist, described how the postcommunist Hungarian government had debated whether or not to repay the debt. Many politicians felt they should not be liable for debts incurred by their communist predecessors; Poland, too, had used refusal to pay back debt as a bargaining chip with the West. But Hungary was not Poland. Hungary decided to pay, Bod explained, because its leaders realized that nobody in the West would care if Hungary went bankrupt.

Peter Rutland highlighted the key paradox: Central Europeans see themselves as Europeans, but their history keeps diverging from the history of Western Europe. In the eighteenth century, for example, democracy grew stronger in Western Europe while the nobility weakened. At the same time, however, democracy seemed stalled in Central Europe while the nobility flourished, supplying grain and wine to a growing Western European capitalist market. This development in class relations helps to explain Jiří Musil's observation that for centuries, many Hungarians have taken the nobility as their reference group, emphasizing "manners" and excelling at diplomacy. (By contrast, the Czech aristocracy was killed or exiled after an unsuccessful uprising against the Hapsburgs in the seventeenth century, and were replaced by nobles imported from elsewhere. According to Musil, the remaining Czechs were primarily peasants and small-town populations who modeled themselves after rich German merchants.) In Musil's view, Hungary's aristocratic ambitions were realized after 1867. Hungarians came to dominate Slovakia, where they are remembered for having instituted a program of forced Hungarianization, allowing no schooling in Slavic languages, and providing higher education only in Budapest until 1882. In the twentieth century, this history has come back to haunt those Hungarians who, as a result of Trianon, now live within the borders of Slovakia. Following the recent "Velvet Divorce" between the Czech Republic and Slovakia, Hungarians have become a minority within Slovakia and are now reported to be under strong pressure to "Slovakianize."

Part of the dilemma of Hungarian identity is thus related to a history in which Hungarians at times have dominated others, and at times have been dominated by others. The current contours of this dilemma are perhaps most clearly revealed in Hungarian attitudes toward two key "minorities" living within their borders, Jews and Gypsies.

Nearly one million Jews lived in Hungary before World War II, and some 30 percent or more of the population of Budapest was Jewish. On the one hand, as one Catholic Hungarian told me, Jews were "good Hungarian patriots." Our guide on a tour of Jewish Budapest pointed out that Jews had sided with Christian Hungarians against Austria in 1848, and were later rewarded by having restrictions against them lifted; they prospered and many were ennobled. On the other hand, the Hungarian regime of 1944 was not willing to take heroic efforts to defend Jews against the Nazis, especially when an alliance with the Axis powers held out the promise of the return of lands taken from Hungary after World War I. Still, Jews fared better in Hungary, and in Budapest in particular, than elsewhere in Europe. There was no formal Jewish ghetto in Budapest until the Nazi occupation in 1944, and diplomats like Raoul Wallenberg and Charles Lutz managed to save the lives of many Jews in the capital by issuing them false papers. Our guide suggested that gentile Hungarians in Budapest were unwilling to turn Jews over to the Nazis because the city could not continue to function without them. She contrasted their fate with that of Jews in small towns outside the capital whose numbers were few, whose identities were known to all, and nearly all of whose lives ended in the death camps.

There seems to be a continuing contrast between attitudes toward Jews in the capital and attitudes elsewhere in the country. At a party I met a young Hungarian man who said he had joined the Smallholders Party because 80 percent of the population of Hungary lived outside the big cities, but the 20 percent in the big cities (he seemed to have Budapest in mind) were running the country. The Smallholders Party has been described by others as a reactionary populist group whose members are openly anti-Semitic. Yet in this same conversation, the young man remarked that his work frequently took him into the Jewish neighborhood of Budapest, and he had discovered to his sur-

prise that Jews were ordinary, decent people. A Jew myself, I was left speechless by his comments.

Hungarian history, especially the Turkish period, is viewed rather differently from a Jewish perspective. Our tour guide described this period in fairly positive terms; as in other Muslim societies, Jews were able to find a place. She also described the end of Turkish rule in far more negative terms, emphasizing how harsh the triumphant Roman Catholics of the Hapsburg Empire had been to those who did not accept Catholicism. Although Jewish institutions in Budapest seem to be thriving, and nobody claimed that anti-Semitism was a serious problem in Hungary today, some Hungarian Jews still suggested that it was not a good idea to advertise one's Jewish identity too loudly if one wanted to advance in society.

Hungarians expected to be asked about anti-Semitism; to be asked about Gypsies, however, took nearly everyone by surprise. If pressed for an opinion, they ordinarily responded with something to the effect that Gypsies could not and/or did not want to be integrated into the Hungarian state; that they were illiterate by choice, and therefore deliberately avoided equipping themselves with the skills that would make them contributing members of Hungarian society; that they were so riven by internal factionalism that trying to deal with them was impossible.

If Musil is correct and the dominant reference group for (educated, urban) Hungarians has been the nobility, then Gypsies would seem to be the negative of the ideal Hungarian, representing everything that the Magyar aristocracy has been trying to leave behind since 996. Many Hungarians seem stung by the fact that outside Hungary, Gypsy music is all that is known of "traditional" Hungarian music. And yet Gypsies constitute the largest ethnic minority in Hungary. How can a modern, democratic Hungarian state *not* take them seriously as full-fledged citizens? Tamás Réti underlined the severe economic deprivation of Hungarian Gypsies: according to official statistics, 70 percent are currently unemployed. Experience of conquest has, at times, led Hungarians to identify with the dominated, rather than the dominators. That experience lay behind Kossuth's attempts to persuade Hungarians to ally with other minorities in the empire, and it brought Christian and Jewish Hungarians

together after 1848, as we have seen. But it seems not to have worked in favor of Hungarian Gypsies in the same way.

II. Blazing Trails

Learning about Hungarian identity in the context of a changing Central Europe, in a faculty seminar based in Budapest, was an extraordinary experience. It was impossible not to thrive when surrounded by colleagues whose willingness to debate in the seminar room was equaled only by their eagerness to meet new people and to explore new places, often at the drop of a hat. My research in linguistic anthropology first attracted me to the seminar. A book of mine comparing linguistic anthropologist Benjamin Whorf with the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin had come to the attention of scholars in Byelarus who contacted me a couple of years ago, after the breakup of the former Soviet Union. Continuing correspondence with them introduced me to a lively scholarly community in a part of the world about which I knew almost nothing. Together with Gitta Hammarberg, I wondered whether scholars in Hungary were equally stimulated by the work of Bakhtin.

Part of my work as an anthropologist, however, also involves teaching and writing about human biology and evolution, interests that diverged from those of other seminar participants. When I learned that the seminar would be in Hungary, the first place I thought of was Vértesszölös, an archaeological site about 50 kilometers west of Budapest, where an important hominid fossil was discovered in the mid-1960s. Between 200,000 and 300,000 years old, the Vértesszölös fossil is classified as “archaic *Homo sapiens*.” Archaic *Homo sapiens* fossils are few and fragmentary, but very important, since they appear to be transitional between the earlier *Homo erectus* (which disappear from the fossil record about 500,000 years ago) and later populations of *Homo sapiens*, such as the Neanderthals, who flourished in Western Europe between 150,000 and 35,000 years ago. My aim was to visit the site, meet scholars who had worked there, and possibly see the fossil itself.

As it turned out, the individuals who might have told us the most about Bakhtin in Hungary were not in Budapest during our visit. On the subject of fossils, however, things were quite

otherwise. Before I left Minnesota, I had obtained the name of Dr. Ildiko Pap, chair of the Department of Anthropology of the Hungarian Natural History Museum in Budapest. By a stroke of good luck, she was in Budapest while we were there. Dr. Pap generously provided materials in English about the work of her department and gave me a tour through rooms shelved from floor to ceiling with the carefully identified materials unearthed in many seasons of digging. She also permitted me to photograph the jewels of this collection: two sets of Neanderthal remains, between 50,000 and 70,000 years old, found at the northern Hungarian site of Suba-lyuk in 1932.

Finally, she offered to put me in touch with colleagues both at the National Museum (where the Vértesszölös fossil is kept) and at the Geological Institute (where 10-million-year-old Miocene ape fossils from the site of Rudabánya are kept). I was disappointed to learn that renovations at the National Museum would make it impossible for me to view the Vértesszölös fossil, but I was delighted to be able to meet Dr. László Kordos at the Geological Institute, who was as generous as Dr. Pap. He told me about recent research projects, showed me his collection of Miocene ape casts, supplied me with offprints and references to published materials, and allowed me to photograph a fossil cranium from Rudabánya that he himself had reassembled from fragments. The final unexpected treat was the Geological Institute itself. Designed by Ödön Lechner and opened in 1900, this magnificent building is considered one of the finest examples in Budapest of Hungarian art nouveau (or *Jugendstil*) architecture.

What I learned about human origins research in Hungary, together with photographs of key fossils, will enrich my teaching of physical anthropology and archaeology at Macalester College. The Hungarian materials themselves will help particularize those inevitable generalizations that must accompany any semester-length discussion of several million years of hominid evolution. Equally important, however, will be what I have learned about the conditions under which Hungarian physical anthropologists and archaeologists carry out their work. While they welcome the personal and scholarly freedom they have experienced since 1989, they are also struggling to cope with funding constraints that, for example, have recently reduced the staff at the Geological Institute from twenty-six to six employ-

ees. Cooperation with anthropologists and archaeologists from other parts of the world on joint research projects has succeeded so far in maintaining a high standard of achievement, but what the future will bring is far from clear. Building international awareness at Macalester College must involve forging international links with scholars such as these, as well as incorporating their findings into our curriculum. I hope to maintain contact with Dr. Pap and Dr. Kordos, and have sent both of them copies of the general anthropology text of which I am senior author. This book covers topics in both physical and cultural anthropology; I hope I may incorporate more Hungarian data into future editions.

The perspective of prehistory that I pursued this summer offers, I believe, a deeper context for considering the phenomenon of transition and cultural identity in Hungary. For archaic *Homo sapiens* 300,000 years ago, for our Neanderthal kin 50,000 years ago, and for generation after generation of anatomically modern members of our own species, the Carpathian Basin has been a major crossroads. Migration and mixing, the expansion and contraction of borders, have been features of this corner of Central Europe for many more than the nearly 1,100 years of the Hungarian state. These processes have both enriched and complicated what it means to be Hungarian. They have enriched and complicated the meaning of Vienna as well. One member of our group asked Jiří Musil if nineteenth-century Vienna did not represent an excellent example of the way urban culture can successfully undergird a multiethnic state. Musil agreed that Vienna had indeed been the site of a wonderful intellectual flowering with a heterogeneous population. Then he added that Vienna had also been an excellent seedbed for Nazism. Perhaps Hungarians should not regret too deeply that they are still in transit.

Notes

1. István Örkény, *One Minute Stories*, trans. Judith Sollosy (Budapest: Corvina, 1994): 97–98.
2. Péter Hanák, ed., *The Corvina History of Hungary* (Budapest: Corvina, 1991): 117.