

HUNGARIAN WRITERS IN THE 1956 REVOLUTION

MIHÁLY SZEGEDY-MASZÁK

Indiana University, Bloomington, IN
USA

My intention is to reexamine some of the documents of the Hungarian revolution that contain statements by Hungarian writers. On October 26 a two-page pamphlet appeared. Its title – ‘Immovably’ – referred to Vörösmarty’s ‘Appeal’. The poems by István Sinka and Ferenc Jankovich, as well as the short essay by the Transylvanian-born author Áron Tamási represented the values of the ‘Populist’ movement of the interwar period. The texts of the November issue of ‘Literary Newsletter’ were by a wider range of writers. While most of the poems had been composed in the early 1950s, including ‘One Sentence on Tyranny’ by Gyula Illyés and ‘The Dictator’ by Lajos Kassák, the essays by Tibor Déry, László Németh, and Lőrinc Szabó were inspired by the uprising. The third document I wish to examine is the collective statement issued by the Writers’ Association on December 28th. Since my paper will focus not on aesthetic values but on political views, I will not exclude texts by mediocre writers. The question I wish to ask is whether any difference can be seen between the positions taken by former communists and those who expressed anti-communist views before 1945.

Keywords: totalitarianism, political resistance, intellectual opposition, literary institutions, (self-)censorship

“In the course of their struggle against Soviet and communist tyranny, Hungarian writers and poets composed works that came to represent an everlasting contribution to Hungarian and world literature”, wrote István Csicsery-Rónai in May 1957, in his Introduction to an anthology published in Washington, D. C. (Csicsery-Rónai 1996, 3). Today no serious literary scholar would accept this value judgement. In Éva Ständeisky’s chapter ‘Literature in the Revolution’, written in 2005 for a new history of Hungarian literature, the reader cannot find a single reference to a text written in the last three months of 1956 that could be characterized as a work of art. My point concerns not so much what these texts are as what they are not. Let there be no mistake about that. What Hungarian authors wrote in or around 1956 has political, historical, or documentary but no aesthetic value.

Once this has been admitted, the question arises to what extent Hungarian writers influenced the course of events. Beyond any doubt, the visual arts, music, and literature were given extraordinary significance in twentieth-century totalitarian régimes. Still, generalizations are dangerous and some distinctions are needed. As the fates of Richard Strauss, Hans Pfitzner, or Wilhelm Furtwaengler suggest, Nazi Germany gave exceptional power to outstanding musicians. It would be difficult to prove that music making suffered because of this. The same cannot be said about communist régimes; Otto Klemperer was forced to leave the Hungarian State Opera after the introduction of the one-party system. Literature became seriously distorted not only in the Third Reich but also in the communist states. No writer could preserve his/her independence from the dangerous influence of politics.

It is no exaggeration to say that the Hungarian literature published in the 1950s is virtually unreadable today. The courage of those who expressed their loss of belief in communism can be appreciated but the works marked by disillusionment are of negligible artistic value. A case in point is the poem called *Pamphlet*, written in January 1953 and published in *Irodalmi Újság* on August 1 of the same year.

Hopeful I was, and now I look around
full of hesitation. (Something is wrong.)

Such words may indicate that Sándor Csoóri, a poet of peasant origin who belonged to the second generation of the Populist movement that had started in the 1920s, was one of the first to lose faith in Mátyás Rákosi as 'the wise leader of the Hungarian people'. Painful as it still is to point to the naiveté of the new intellectuals manipulated by the communists, such a confession of uncertainty can be given more credit than the change of attitude of those educated communists who in 1953 decided to side with Imre Nagy and later claimed to play a decisive role in the revolution. Péter Kuczka, for instance, still lamented the disintegration of collective farms and the cult of private property, and continued to speak of class struggle in *Nyírség Diary*, published in *Irodalmi Újság* on November 7, 1953. "Comrades, we have made mistakes", he wrote with considerable cynicism. Middle-aged writers who had started their careers as non-communists before World War II, were either silenced or afraid to make any declaration that could lead to punishment. On 21 November 1954, the Transylvanian-born Áron Tamási published an "Open Letter" in *Magyar Nemzet*, the daily that pretended to represent the Patriotic Front and not the Hungarian Workers' Party. On the one hand, he reminded his readers that he had never joined any political party, on the other, he affirmed his belief in socialism.

It was not until the second half of 1955 that the signs of a conflict between the political establishment and the Hungarian Writers' Association became manifest.

One of the issues of *Irodalmi Újság* was banned because it contained a poem by the provincial and disillusioned communist László Benjámín that ridiculed József Darvas, Minister of Culture. Today the works of both of these two writers are justly forgotten. On October 14 a poem entitled *Bartók* appeared in the popular magazine *Színház és Mozi*. In this text Gyula Illyés associated Picasso's distorted women and horses with human suffering. The December issue of *Új Hang*, containing another piece by the same poet, was banned, and the production of *Galileo*, a play by Illyés's close friend László Németh, was not permitted since this play was thought to be a parable about the current situation, and a similar ban was put on *The Tragedy of Man*, a lyrical drama composed in 1860–1861, because of a scene that presented a phalanstery.

Some communists decided to criticize their leaders. On March 30, 1956, at a meeting of the party members of the Writers' Association, Sándor Lukácsy, known as the organiser of the destruction of books after the introduction of the one-party system, compared Rákosi to Judas, and on June 27, in a speech at the meeting of the Petőfi Circle the prose writer Tibor Déry blamed József Darvas, Márton Horváth, and József Révai for their cultural policy (*Írók lázadása* 1990, 32–33, 156–161). On August 11 another poem by Illyés appeared in *Irodalmi Újság*. *Hunyadi's Hand* represented a way of writing characteristic of the communist period. It seemed to speak of the past but in fact gave an interpretation of the present. The archaic style was meant to conceal the message. The statue of János Hunyadi, the warrior who fought in the battles with the Ottoman Turks in the 15th century, was given a voice, and the spirit of the past referred to "the nation's tomb". On August 18 *Trust in Freedom*, a poem by Lajos Kassák appeared in the same weekly. "Besides peaceful resignation, brave opposition can also be a merit of human beings." These words explicitly urged people to organize resistance.

The message of these two poems was supplemented by the arguments made in articles. On July 28, the president of the Writers' Association, the Populist writer Péter Veres defended the general mood of the population against the charge of nationalism formulated by the political leaders, and in the September 8 issue of *Irodalmi Újság* two communist writers published articles that contained critical remarks. Déry dismissed the Hungarian literature of the period that started with 1948 as the manifestation of a 'Stalinist era', and Gyula Házy condemned self-censorship (Csicsery-Rónai 1996, 59–62). On September 17 Veres opened the session of the Writers' Association by making the point that 'writers always walk in front of society' (Csicsery-Rónai 1996, 65). This assumption clearly shows that in 1956 Hungarian writers modelled their role on the activity of their predecessors in 1848.

Characteristically, the circle in which the most radical criticism of the régime was articulated was named after Petőfi, the Peasant Party led by Veres was rebaptised Petőfi Party, and *Appeal*, a poem by the nineteenth-century Romantic

poet Mihály Vörösmarty set to music by Béni Egressy, became so closely associated with the uprising that after 1956 people were not allowed to sing it. *Relentlessly*, one of the most important documents of the revolution brought out on October 26 by Sándor Püski, the publisher of the Populists, also borrowed its title from the opening line of Vörösmarty's poem.

1956 is often compared to 1848. Of course, history never repeats itself. From the perspective of literary or even cultural history, the differences are striking, even if it is granted that what happened at the end of October 1956 was the result of processes that had started several years before. The unimaginative fiction and even the somewhat unsophisticated essays of Veres are largely forgotten today, and except for Kassák, who is chiefly remembered for the works he composed between the outbreak of World War I and the 1930s, no one among the poets, not even Illyés has left a poetic legacy as significant as those of Vörösmarty, Petőfi, and János Arany. It cannot be claimed that any member of Imre Nagy's two cabinets, not even the political scientist István Bibó, had written works that could compete in complexity with the output of István Széchenyi or Lajos Kossuth, and no fiction writer of the stature of József Eötvös, Zsigmond Kemény, or Mór Jókai was involved in the fight against totalitarianism.

In 1956 literary institutions played a more important role than individuals. On September 18 the Presidential Council of the Hungarian Writers' Association was reshuffled. The election was by secret ballot, and although the political pressure made it impossible to have a poll that could be called free and fair, the procedure was unprecedented and set an example for later events. Such non-communists as the poets Kassák, Illyés, and Lőrinc Szabó were elected, together with Áron Tamási and even László Németh, whose *Galileo* had its first rehearsal on September 23. Several communist authors exercised self-criticism, although it is possible to sense some ambiguity in their declarations. "Tragic experience, fatal mistakes, and self-torture have forced communist writers to decide not to lie under any circumstances." This statement by Gyula Háy at the meeting of the Writers' Association may sound more credible than the claim Tamás Aczél made in his highly rhetorical *Ode to Europe*, published in *Irodalmi Újság* on October 6, that "we should open the frontier and look around in the world, (...) then adopt what is good and leave behind what we don't like" (Csicsery-Rónai 1996, 65, 68). Áron Tamási's article *A Hungarian Exhortation* and László Németh's short essay *A Nation on the Rise* belong to the documents that make it difficult to decide whether the caution that characterized numerous writers' position was necessitated by fear or could be explained in terms of the illusion that Hungary could remain independent of both the United States and the Soviet Union and develop a political system that represented a third road between Western capitalism and Eastern socialism, market-oriented and planned economy. Tamási's article was published first in *Relentless*, whereas Németh's text was read on Free Kossuth Radio on November 1.

Both were also published in the only issue of *Irodalmi Újság* published during the revolution, on November 2.

The two important poems that appeared in what must be seen as the most significant literary manifestation of the revolution were composed years before 1956. *One Sentence on Tyranny* has become so fully institutionalized that few can read it as a work of art. It is a text with an explicit message, and its relative popularity when compared with other poems of Illyés, would seem to bear this out. As far as I know, the date of its composition is uncertain. According to its author, it was composed in the early 1950s, so it may highlight the assumption that literature had paved the way for the revolution. According to the poet, the manuscript was so effectively hidden that no one could find it, but both he and his wife knew it by heart. At the time of the outbreak of the 1956 revolution he was visiting the poet Lőrinc Szabó in Miskolc. After his return to Budapest, the Petőfi Party asked him to give them some text for publication, so he wrote down the poem.

It follows from the historical nature of art that the reputation of every work may change. It would be a mistake to deny that currently the poetry of Illyés is, to put it mildly, rather unpopular in Hungary, especially among younger people. *One Sentence on Tyranny* is usually regarded as his most memorable poem. It was published first on November 2, 1956, in the only revolutionary issue of *Irodalmi Újság*, the organ of the Hungarian Writers' Association started in 1950. Until 1986 it could not appear legally in Hungary but was known from Western and illegal publications as well as from cassettes containing the author's reading his works and made in the 1960s in the USA. On this occasion it cannot be my task to give a detailed textual analysis of this work. Let it suffice to say that it can be read as a distorted version or parody of *Liberté*, the first piece in Paul Éluard's collection *Poésie et vérité*, published in 1942. Illyés became acquainted with this French poet during his stay in Paris, in the 1920s, and *Liberté* was translated into Hungarian by György Somlyó in the 1950s. This version was re-published in the Budapest daily *Népszava* on October 30, 1956, and in the provincial newspaper *Várpalotai Napló* on November 3. Some readers may have realized that the structure of the Hungarian poem was modelled on that of the French poem.

Éluard's 85-line text was composed at the time of the German occupation of France. It appears to consist of a single sentence. Its four-line stanzas end with the words "J'écris ton nom", with the exception of the last stanza, which is followed by the word that is also the title of the poem:

Et pour le pouvoir d'un mot
Je recommence ma vie
Je suis né pour te connaître
Pour te nommer

Liberté.

Both poems are based on the structural principle of gradation.

One Sentence on Tyranny was not the only text published in the November 2 issue of *Irodalmi Újság* that reminded the public of the writers' role in the preparation of what happened on and after October 23, 1956. *The Dictator*, a free-verse poem by Lajos Kassák, the leader of the Hungarian avant-garde of the second and third decades of the twentieth century, was composed in 1952. The year is significant, since it indicates that in contrast to most of his contemporaries, Kassák expressed his hatred of totalitarianism before the death of Stalin. The poem acquired a special significance at the time of its appearance, since it much less commented on the actual than forecast the inevitable; it was possible to read it as a prediction about the dismantling of the Soviet leader's Budapest statue, the work of the sculptor Sándor Mikus. In addition, it could be mentioned that it was Kassák who at a meeting of the Writers' Association, after Stalin's death, the Berlin uprising, and the Soviet leaders' decision to replace Mátyás Rákosi with Imre Nagy as prime minister, demanded the implementation of the reforms planned by the new cabinet in the summer of 1953. In consequence, Kassák lost his membership in the Hungarian Workers' Party. Contrary to widely held beliefs, Kassák played a much more significant role in the intellectual opposition to totalitarianism than such renegades as Tibor Méray, Tamás Aczél, Gyula Háy, or even Tibor Déry. Let us remember that Kassák openly disapproved of the dictatorship of the working class as early as 1919. After his attack on Béla Kun appeared in *Ma*, that journal was banned by the Hungarian communists. It is also symptomatic that in the later 1920s, after several years spent in exile, Kassák decided to return to Hungary rather than to live in Moscow, in sharp contrast to Béla Balázs, György Lukács, and others. The last two parts of his autobiography *The Life of a Man*, the sections about 1918 and 1919, were banned in interwar Hungary after a fairly large number of copies had been sold. Characteristically, they were not published between 1945 and the 1980s.

Instead of discussing the activity of those communists who in late 1956 fled to the West and in their highly biased interpretations overstressed their part in the revolution, I wish to mention two components of literary activity in October and November 1956. One of these was the response of the Hungarian writers who had lived abroad since the late 1940s. The most important among these was Sándor Márai, who flew from North America to Munich to interview those who had fled because of the Soviet invasion that started on November 4. On his return to New York, he composed the poem *Angel, Coming from Heaven*. Although Márai was not a good verse writer, this piece, inspired by a popular Christmas song, is a moving testimony to the revolution, comparing the suffering of the Hungarians to that of Christ and condemning the Western decision not to interfere. Another writer who tried to interpret the revolution in the West was László Cs. Szabó, who on

October 30 in a BBC program spoke hopefully of the resurrection of his homeland.

As far as the texts composed in Hungary are concerned, it could be argued that the revolution had left its mark on popular rather than on high culture. Much anonymous verse and oral history can be associated with October 1956. As is well-known, several writers were imprisoned in 1957. It is less often mentioned that even amateurs were persecuted. To give a random example, János Abrudbányai, the Unitarian priest of Kocsord, a small village in Eastern Hungary, got seven years of imprisonment because at Christmas 1956 schoolboys recited two of his poems condemning the foreign occupation (Dikán 1993, 217–219).

It has been demonstrated that János Kádár could not tolerate allusions to the execution of Imre Nagy. That may be a partial reason for the scarcity of references to the revolution in the Hungarian literature of the 1960s and 1970s. Those writers who departed from the official interpretation were punished even in the 1980s. When *An Everlasting Summer: I Am Older than 9*, a poem composed by Gáspár Nagy in 1983, appeared in the Tatabánya monthly *Új Forrás*, in October 1984, its author ceased to be the secretary of the Hungarian Writers' Association. My very rough translation of the final stanza:

once there will be a funeral
we must not forget
and have to name the murderers.

One cannot do justice to the original in which the last word of each of these lines is an infinitive, a form that in Hungarian has the ending NI, the initials of Imre Nagy.

There are very few comparable works that date from the decades prior to 1989. Sad as it may seem, the compromise most Hungarian writers made with Kádár's régime was successful in removing the revolution from the memory of the generations that emerged in the two or even three decades after 1956. György Aczél, Kádár's cultural advisor did his best to gain the support of the leading intellectuals, including not only Illyés but those who were silenced after 1948. When I was working on my book on Géza Ottlik, I found drafts of letters by this non-communist writer addressed to Aczél on the birthday of this political leader (Szegedy-Maszák 1994). Self-censorship led to a corruption with consequences that will not disappear in the foreseeable future. Márai may have been right in believing that Hungary paid a very high price. Kádár's régime was arguably more liberal than that of the rest of the Eastern bloc, but the loss may have been irreparable. Péter Esterházy's book called *Revised Edition* about his father's work as a spy for the communists after 1956 may remind us that today there are many Hungarian citizens who could be blamed for what they had done before 1989. To be more specific, it would be difficult to find any text by any historian published in Hun-

gary in the period between 1957 and 1989 with no trace of political concessions. On a personal note, I could mention that nowadays I participate in the monthly meetings of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences with an old colleague who censored my publications in the 1960s, 70s, and even 80s. The latent, “deep down” thing is our mutual wonderment as to what we may remember. I may give him rope and yet at the same time remain tied. On one occasion, Péter Esterházy, whose works I admire, seemed to thank me that I never made him aware that I knew that his father was a spy, although he sent reports about my family that I did not care to read after the documents had been released. The words “you are both the prison-keeper and the prisoner” and “every one is a link in the chain” may strike us as prophetic for a long period. This prophecy about the inevitable consequences of everyone’s active function as a wheel in the machine of the totalitarian system distinguishes *One Sentence on Tyranny* from the pseudo-confessional and/or bombastic declarations of second-rate versifiers and journalists who have done an excellent job in exploiting and manipulating the memory of the 1956 revolution. Illyés’s French culture, his initiations of intelligence and experience, if one will, to say nothing of his work as a translator, make for me a sort of figure who wished to avoid both provincialism and superficial internationalism. It is important that what we may learn from *One Sentence on Tyranny*, we learn less about the early 1950s than about the years that followed the date of its composition. I seem to run here the risk of a bit of exposure to the charge of more or less repeating what Márai wrote in exile, but it may be important to state that, whether designedly or not, the bulk of the Hungarian population betrayed the revolution in the decades that followed 1956. Of course, the blame should be put on the Western reluctance to help rather than on the lethargy of those who survived those decades as citizens of a Warsaw-Pact country. In any case, 1956 promotes infinite reflection, makes a hundred queer and ugly things glare at us right and left.

References

- Csicsery-Rónai, István (ed.) (1996) *Költők forradalma: Antológia 1953–1956*. 3rd ed. Budapest: Occidental Press.
- Dikán, Nóra (ed.) (1993) *Az 1956-os forradalom utáni megtorlás Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg megyei dokumentumai*. Nyíregyháza: Jósza András Múzeum.
- Írók lázadása: Az 1956-os Írószövetségi jegyzőkönyvek* (1990). Budapest: MTA Irodalomtudományi Intézet.
- Standeisky, Éva (2005) ‘1956: Irodalom a forradalomban. Az *Irodalmi Újság* november 2-i száma’ (typescript).
- Szegedy-Maszák, Mihály (1994) *Ottlik Géza*. Pozsony: Kalligram.