

## **Hungary is a disaster**

He receives us in slippers, leaning on his cane, and warns us, not without humour: *“One of the effects of my medication is not that I’ve died, as one might have expected, but that I have to search for my words”*. In 2002 Imre Kertész became the first Hungarian Nobel laureate for literature, for works including *Fateless*, *Fiasco*, *The Holocaust as culture...* At 82, this concentration camp survivor spoke in Hungarian on the Hungary of today and his conception of the role of the writer.

## **What do you think of Viktor Orban’s Hungary?**

I’ve lived in Berlin for ten years now, far away from Hungarian politics. Nevertheless, if you want to understand them, you have to think of the painter Marcel Duchamps. He said: *“There is no solution because there are no problems.”* This definitely applies to Hungary. Nothing has changed in that country. The fascinating leader: we’re in the same situation as in the era of Janos Kadar (1956-1988). Hungary is bewitched by Orban, as though he were the Pied Piper of Hamelin. This is something very deep. And leaves me with a real concern...

## **A concern?**

I wonder if the country has made a choice between Asia and the West. Don’t forget that the Hungarians are descendants of tribes of Asiatic origin who settled in the heart of Europe in the 9th century. In school, Hungarian children learn that their ancestors came from the southern Steppes of the Urals to settle in the Carpathian basin. At the same time, they adopted Christianity. All Hungarians therefore have this sense of divided loyalties. Which is also a contradiction, because the norms of a Christian society are different from those of a tribal one. If I emphasise this double polarity, that’s because it seems to me to form the basis of the current situation.

## **After seventy years of authoritarianism, from Horthy (1920-1944) to Kadar, you might imagine that Hungarians would want to defend their hard-won democracy...**

I’m not a historian, but Hungary is a country in which there has never been a democracy—in the sense of not just a political system, but an organic process which motivates the whole of society. In the Hungarian case, this development was blocked by the rise of the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century. And there has been no recovery from this setback. In historical terms, we can expect that democracy has no real meaning in that country.

## **Hence, Duchamp’s surrealist conclusion.**

Yes. The question I ask myself is: why has Hungary always taken the wrong path? Remember. When revolution was roaring through Europe, Hungary supported Marie-Thérèse! From the 16th century onwards, the country was first part of the Ottoman empire, then the Habsburg, then the Soviet bloc. Every time, it tried to play the game of the country which had absorbed it. That appeared to work quite well. But only in appearance. Under Kadar the country seemed like the most enthusiastic part of the Soviet camp, but that was at the price of the suppression of the 1956 revolution and a political indebtedness which cost them dearly. The current situation is just another example of this tendency to take the wrong path. The Hungarian state chooses today to be in opposition to Europe in the name of the defence of its national interest, which gives the impression of a return to sovereignty.

But once more it's in error. Nothing new, no problem, and therefore no solution because there is no problem.

**Your irony is evident. But is there really nothing that can be done?**

Ten years ago, I met a young Hungarian with a German passport. He lived abroad but he had just spent a semester at the University of Budapest. He explained to me with some disgust how much the students of the time were partisans of the far right. Everywhere else in the world, he said, students were of the left. Only in Hungary had he encountered this conformist, fascistic tendency among the youth. We looked for an explanation: in vain. Not everything has an explanation. Sometimes we must just accept the facts. Hungary is a disaster which has neither meaning nor explanation and which is unique in Europe. The Hungarians cling to their destiny. They will finish, undoubtedly, in a failure that they cannot understand.

**You were deported to Hungary at the age of 15. Can you consider Hungarian anti-Semitism as a foregone conclusion?**

Auschwitz, the Holocaust, this page of history has not really been studied in Hungary. No examination of conscience. This country has never asked itself why it has consistently been on the wrong side of history. My friend the writer Peter Nadas just published a big analysis in the Hungarian magazine ES (December 2011). He finds that Hungary's authoritarianism stems from the "spirit of the provinces". The foundations of this authoritarianism are the tribal origins, the lineages. The republic is irrelevant in a country built on a religious network which cultivates the patriarchal spirit. Hatred of Jews (who make up 2% of the population) like that of the gypsies (7% of the population) is necessary in order to impose a tribal, primitive idea of the nation.

**Can we see a parallel with the 1930s?**

In Hungary, yes. There are pages on that in my *Diaries*. Images. The walls of the metro escalators in Budapest covered in posters in the same green that the Arrow Cross Party used (Hungarian fascists of the 1930s): "*Neither left nor right, Christian and Hungarian*" and underneath, the sign of the far-right party. These visions remind me of my childhood. In 1938 we collected the electoral flyers of the Arrow Cross Party: Jews in top hat and tails, bouncing like fleas in the passage of a steamroller...

**Does this upset you?**

Of course. It hurts me. I have a few friends on the right in Budapest, but I can only contact them covertly. There is an awkwardness between us. I make them run a risk. It doesn't look well, to have warm relations with me. If you remember the outburst of violence after I received my Nobel prize: I was reproached for being the only Hungarian Nobel laureate and for not glorifying 'Hungarianness'. After *Someone Other*, I was attacked for presenting the country in a very bleak light. I was even asked if I was really a Hungarian writer. The culture of hatred is such that it is very difficult to tell my friends that I also speak to people on the left.

**Don't you want to take up your pen to protest?**

I am 82. I am sick. My reaction has been to move here, to Berlin. Act? I can only write. And when I do, it either has no influence or it only gathers condemnations. With some exceptions, of course:

when my *Diaries* were published in Hungary, for the first time there was a sympathetic reaction. Does that mean that not all of Hungary is going to follow the Piper? It reminded me of Karl Kraus's remark: "*The situation is desperate, but not serious.*"

### **You don't feel a sense of public responsibility?**

I have never been an activist. I envy the writer who speaks rarely. The inflexible writer who, even in the storm, paddles his boat alone. When Hungary became a free and supposedly democratic country, it forced me into the box marked "Jewishness". The country took no notice of my lived experience or of my literary works. That stopped me from ever developing a sense of national solidarity. It's sad, because it confirms the old prejudice that "the Jew" has nothing to do with "the Hungarian." But everything is a fool's trick in the current public situation. And also semantically. No word, no phrase, has any real meaning. Reason has no place here. Instead, the emotions rule, romanticism, sentimentalism.

### **How do you see the future?**

Some days, I tell myself that secretly the Hungarians know that we're going in the wrong direction. And that Orban will fail—after all, in the 1940s, the situation in Southern Tyrol seemed equally intractable. And that was resolved. But I don't think we can rule out any hypothesis. It's also possible that Hungary will descend into utter chaos. That would be a tragedy, but when the people are alienated from politics and the economy is in an impasse, the danger is serious. The question of the gypsies is as important as that of the Jews. If the systematic persecution of the gypsies continues, they will eventually lose patience. They will be driven to violence.

### **What are your plans now?**

On his deathbed, Bartok said: "*I'm leaving with full suitcases*". In my suitcases, I've got my *Diaries*, which I'm working on despite the fact that my illness makes it hard for me to type. And a new novel, whose Hungarian title is *Vegso Kocsma* (The last hostel)... What's it about? Everything. If I manage to complete it, it will be, after *Kaddish for an unborn child* and *Liquidation*, the culmination of a trilogy. These three books fit into a historical cycle. They form a circle.

### **The last hostel—is that death?**

No... No, of course not... Nothing so serious!

Trans. from Hungarian to French by Paul Gradwohl, and from French to English by Josephine Grahl