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## RESTLESS HUNGARY

By András Máté-Tóth

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### Status Quo

#### *Search for Identity*

Imre Kertész entitled his novel, for which he was later awarded the Nobel Prize, "Fatelessness."<sup>1</sup> Based on his own Auschwitz experiences, he posed questions concerning his own youth: who was he actually? what actually happened? and, finally, did all of this "actually" exist? In his other novels, he had struggled with his lost story, and at the end of his life he came to the conclusion that there, in Auschwitz, not only did the child Kertész, not only did his Hungarian and non-Hungarian "blood comrades," but somehow the entire European culture, did loose its fate. He is not alone with this claim, and neither did he lose his credibility, but with the conclusion in a fateful lack of destiny, he remains quite alone. Unlike Adorno, he did not believe that "writing a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric," nor did he share the opinion of other Jewish and non-Jewish thinkers that Auschwitz cannot be understood or interpreted. No, Kertész was of the opinion that Auschwitz is the end of Christian European history.

*"In the Holocaust, I recognized the situation of humans, the terminus of the great adventure, where Europeans had arrived after two thousand years of ethical and moral culture."*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> First published in Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1975. The English version appeared first in 1992, translated from Hungarian by Christopher C. Wilson, Katharina M. Wilson. (Northwestern University Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Nobel-lecture 2002: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2002/kerteszs/25364-imre-kerteszs-nobel-lecture-2002-2/>

But he went a step further and argued that, precisely for this reason, this story should be started and redesigned. In his opinion, the foundations of this new beginning should be sought in the Greek and Latin classics and in the Bible. The experience of the Holocaust is not only the fate of the Jews and not only of the citizens of Europe at that time, but it is somehow our common abhorrent and provocative inheritance. We live in a post-genocide culture, which does not simply mean that we live chronologically after this tragedy, but rather that we must see and recognize in it a paradigm of our European culture.

*"He who makes his own fate his own accepts it with all strangeness, only he is free, and that is an uplifting feeling."*

So Kertész means, as can be seen from this short quotation, that we experience our fate as strange, alienating, and disconcerting, and we have to confess it, together with this feeling of disgust, as our own fate. And furthermore, this existential gesture has a liberating effect towards the alienating fate. The identification of our culture as a post-genocide culture offers the chance for the recognition of ourselves after all alienation.

### ***Hungary***

Nowadays, many people ask what is happening in Hungary. Especially people who came to know and appreciate our country as the happiest barrack in the Eastern bloc and who knew from their own experience that it was an island in the great communist Red Sea, the Archipelago Goulash (alluding to the Archipelago Gulag in the Soviet Union). After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Hungary was for a while still a pioneer in the transformation to the market economy, to democracy, in short—in the direction of freedom. And now the economic data shows that Hungary is no longer a pioneer but has rather slipped backwards. Government policy is being branded "illiberal"<sup>3</sup> and despite more and more similar choices throughout Europe, we are still considered the forerunner of xenophobia. A country of hospitality has become a country of hostility towards guests. Help for understanding this is needed, urgently.

The Hungarian writer György Konrád—known in Germany not least as President of the Academy of Arts in Berlin (1997-2003)—wrote the following sentences in his book, *Anti-politics*, which are also illuminating today: "We helped the discord to reconciliation, we made the militant

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<sup>3</sup> A term chosen by the Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in Băile Tușnad, Romania, on 26 July 2014.

extremes profane, we experimented with the paradoxical middle, we went through the incomparable in ourselves"<sup>4</sup> and further: "I reconcile the warlike extremes." He describes Hungary as a paradoxical center among other Central European countries even prior to the fall of communism. And this paradox remains a characteristic of Hungary to date. He saw a center of Europe simply geographically and viewed the paradox of that period through its Intermediary status at that time between Germany and the Soviet Union. According to this metaphor, the snapshots taken in recent years may show one side of this paradox more than unequivocally, and one can only hope that the radicalism, the "warlike extremes," will not become a norm in Hungary and in the other countries of the region, especially the V4, the so called Višegrad countries (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary). The transformation after the fall of communism did not happen along a straight line; this is already common knowledge. I myself divide the period of the last 25 years into two sub-periods and call them the first and second wave of freedom. The first wave is characterized by a mostly naive hope for freedom and prosperity; the second wave by disillusionment and by ambivalent experiences with freedom and prosperity. However, there are many indications that after these first two waves of freedom there is a third wave on the way, one characterized by radicalization of politics and by a breach in society. What Konrad was able to call thirty years ago a paradoxical middle no longer seems to be a paradox for many observers but an incurable and unbridgeable dichotomy, without any middle.

Something has returned to our lives and our minds, which we in Hungary, as well as many friends in East-Central Europe, were unified against: a black-and-white, policy-driven milieu. The media are constantly fueling political indoctrinations, whipping up people's moods, with everything being perceived as "the last straw." The biblical metaphor about returning demons seems to have become reality.

*"When it arrives, it finds the house swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that person is worse than the first." (Luke 11:25-26)*

In Hungary, the basic structural elements of democracy and a market economy have been developed. But the culture of freedom, the recognition of others, and, above all, civic responsibility

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<sup>4</sup> *Anti-politics: Central European Meditations*. Translated from Hungarian by Hans-Henning Paeztké, (1984).

have not yet been able to develop properly. This lag behind the western European standard is not only due to the communist era. This whole region is in a 100 to 150- year delay compared to France or Great Britain, according to historians, such as Jenő Szűcs. The churches play a mixed role in catching up with the culture of freedom. On the one hand, they have not properly come to terms with their own history of freedom and democracy; on the other hand, they support the legal framework of religious freedom so that they can carry out their pastoral ministries and other matters autonomously, without state control. Freedom for the church is desirable, however, a freedom within the church is problematic. The big churches in our countries are essentially no different from society, as is the case everywhere else with big churches. Just as political parties can seldom strike the right chord in the population, similarly, church leaders also have problems with initiatives from below, with critical comments on their pastoral style, or with requests for funding preferences.

However, the picture of Hungarian society and churches is not painted in black and white only. It is colorful, more and more colorful; one only needs to take a more relaxed viewing position and break up the simplistic view of the populist dichotomy. Then it becomes apparent that although many young people imagine their future outside Hungary, the majority remain, despite the opportunity to leave. Although constant reforms of the health and educational systems are upsetting many things, there are excellent, internationally recognized schools with students who achieve above-average success at home and abroad. Though many uncritically agree with the political slogans, many are critical and measure domestic politics by European standards. Although some hierarchs echo the political slogans of the government, others hold up the mirror of the Gospel to the government, whose tendency is to call itself Christian. I do not want to deny the serious problems, radicalizations, and alarming crises, but I dare to get close enough to the Hungarian reality to see its multicolored diversity. Sharp images are never easy, they are simply more detailed.

### ***Borderline Collective Disorder***

If we are then ready to really get closer to this country, we will not only be confronted with the superficial daily politics conveyed by the sensationalist media. With more patience, we will be able to hear centuries-old sighs of unfulfilled dreams about freedom, autonomy, and self-determination behind the voices of the hysterical public. The peoples of East-Central Europe have

always lived in a battlefield between great hegemonic powers. Their social development has suffered repeated cuts from outside. And they have not been able to discuss and come to terms with this entire historical heritage of 40 or 70 years of totalitarian dictatorship. It is as if we are living in a permanent historian's quarrel about the Holocaust, the Gulag, and hard and soft dictatorship. The instabilities of the past and present are mutually reinforcing; they are both symptoms of our society and, at the same time, occasions for populist politics.

It is, therefore, not entirely unfair to say that this region suffers from a borderline social disorder. The term *borderline* in psychiatry comes from the notion of a geographical border. In psychiatry, borderline syndrome is used for disorders that I am now reformulating as collective identity. The internal sentiments of such a person are characterized by instability—idealization, devaluation, and manipulation—while at the same time being intense, with frequent outbursts of anger, constant irritability, and lack of control of anger in situations that do not justify the intensity of such feelings. The society in question is unsure about its collective identity, e.g. "Who are we?"... Fluctuations in mood often oscillate conspicuously between dejection, irritability, fear, and normality. Paranoid ideas are triggered by stress.

## **Distances**

### *Slowness*

We have taken Imre Kertész as a guide to diagnose the Hungarian and also the European depressions. It took him all his life to get to the point where he could see the need for a new cultural beginning with its foundation on the rocks of the ancient classical literature and the Bible. Writers have time, they roam the streets, concert halls, and hotel lobbies, smoking cigarettes, one after the other, looking with half-open eyes into a world that only they know and where only they can get lost. In the age of airplanes and mobile phones, these foggy existences are completely alienated, but it is precisely this alienation and this distance that is the condition for inviting one's own fate to the table and having an absinthe with it.

Milan Kundera's *Slowness*<sup>5</sup> may be mentioned here, a short novel that is perhaps not among the author's best works, such as *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* or *The Joke*. The characters in

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<sup>5</sup> Originally in French under the title "La Lenteur" (1995).

this short book are involved in sometimes complicated, sometimes primitive, experiences in a castle built in the 18th century. The conflicts, the disappointments, and all the scenes come at a rather fast pace, as if the author had forgotten that he was about to write about slowness, until the main character, before he starts the engine, switches into a different speed--that of viewing--and says:

*"I want to go on contemplating my Chevalier as he walks slowly towards the chaise. I want to relish the rhythm of his steps: the farther he goes, the slower they are. In this slowness I seem to recognize a sign of happiness."*<sup>6</sup>

Today's turbulences in Hungary, in Central Europe, and elsewhere are oppressive; they rightly evoke fear, and push us against the wall with the question of where all this will lead. I am very impressed by the way my fellow scholars and friends let themselves be drawn into the discussion with lightning-fast speed, how they act with insights, arguments, and proposed solutions taken from the daily press, especially in a highly complex world that can only be considered comprehensible through simplifications bordering on intellectual dishonesty. The limits of the intellectual and the biological capacity of the *animal rational* have long been reached and far exceeded. I must agree with Armin Nassehi the famous German sociologist when he writes that our world is already so complex today that we are living in the last hour of truth.<sup>7</sup> It is no more than an onanistic philosophising to claim that the processes of today's world are no longer comprehensible; to the contrary, they are a most persistent reality that must be reckoned with. It is not the cessation of thinking that obliges the recognition of the extreme genius of thinking, but rather it is precisely a consistent and courageous thinking that obliges us to do so. It would be nice to dream and to fight selflessly and sacrificially for a just and sustainable solution for Hungary and Europe to be found sooner or later. It would be hopeful to be able to think of democracy and the market economy, human rights, and the faith in the God of Jesus Christ as something clear, which as pioneering candleholders direct our efforts on the right tracks. It is precisely with regard to the basic values and basic structures of Europe, or in other words, the Christian world, that we are

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<sup>6</sup> English translation by Linda Asher, HarperCollins, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> *Die letzte Stunde der Wahrheit: Warum gut und böse, rechts und links, progressiv und konservativ keine Alternativen mehr sind.* [The last hour of truth: Why good and evil, right and left, progressive and conservative are no longer alternatives.] (2015)

experiencing the most dramatic developments. The well-rehearsed logic of the post-war period, which continued to inspire our thinking after the fall of the Berlin Wall, according to which the West can offer the post-communist states a path that is not without problems, but which nevertheless works, proved to be wrong. These societies do not want this democracy, this market economy, these human rights, and this faith; they want something else. And this pillar of the post-war period is becoming increasingly dizzying, and faith in it seems to be weakening.

The hopeless fragmentation of the Hungarian public, which reaches deep into family life, into the life of the world of work and circles of friends, is not only political in nature. It can rather be interpreted as the overburdening of a post-genocide culture that is less settled in the countries of the former Eastern bloc, although its traces are becoming increasingly evident in Western Europe and in the North Atlantic world in general. It is certainly difficult, if not impossible, to justify retreating into passive resistance and adopting a laconic position of contempt for the world from the outside, so to speak. We cannot leave our turbulent and confused world, like the main character of Kundera's *Slowness*, but we—especially as Christians and the Christian intelligencia—have the option of keeping an inner distance in the midst of these turbulences, and to dive into the groundbreaking sources of the classics and the Bible and to deepen in them. We must not give up hope that we will not be left alone in this and that we will be able to reach the experience of being gifts.

### **Access**

Paul, to whom we owe the spread of Christianity, was forced by the Roman authorities to slow down, to distance himself. He was in prison for two years, which we would today rather call house arrest, because he was allowed to preach and teach and to receive unrestricted guests. During this time of intensification of his mission, after many years of extensification, he wrote essential letters that allow serious reflection even for our unkempt situations. Back to the sources—admonished Imre Kertész—now we follow his highly credible instruction.

### ***Onesimus: from illegal migrant to brother in Christ***

Paul sends a slave by the name Onesimus back to his owner, Philemon. The slave escaped from his master and became friends with Paul. Paul asks Philemon to mercifully take Onesimus back, but in a completely new relationship, as a brother.



*"But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever — no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother."* (Philemon 1:14-16)

Before we are tempted by the associations with life-saving baptisms in the time of National Socialism or in our time in the Muslim world to think that this is merely an inner-Christian affair, the next sentence in the letter gives another reason:

*"He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord."* (16)

The so-called refugee crisis dramatically reinforces the need to recognize all people fundamentally and irrevocably as human beings. That our world can only continue to exist on this basis is less and less of a question. But how societies with their diverse memories and present circumstances are able and willing to act according to this principle is a pressing question. The German people, as well as Austrians, Swedes and the Dutch have set a shining example of this option for mankind. There are similar but sporadic gestures of solidarity in Hungary and other countries of CEE – in strong political headwind.

We do not always know how people—all people—unconditionally recognize and accept each other as human beings. But that the churches and Christians should stand for it in word and deed, hopefully becomes more and more clear. A rethinking in this direction is needed for Christians and for the hierarchy, so that they are not forced but prepared from their deepest convictions to expand their private and social zones of comfort.

***Wall of separation: then between Jews and Christians, today between the worlds***

Paul reflects on Christ and sees in Him, in His person and in His work, a paradigmatic turning point, especially with regard to that which divides us. In the letter to the Ephesians he goes into depth on an approach that is also philosophically significant. In His person and in His body, Christ has torn down the dividing wall of enmity and thus renewed people on one side and on the other.

*"For he himself is our peace. He [...] has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations"* (Ephesians 2:14-15).

Especially in Berlin, where I'm writing this text, where certain historical processes have torn down the dividing wall, the wall that symbolically applies to all dividing walls in Europe, the divisions are political, religious, and economic. It is precisely from here that Christians and churches can in turn bear witness to the constant provocations from all kinds of divisions between people. Not from economic, political or humanitarian sources, but from the most intimate source of their religion and from the relationship with Christ, which must be constantly re-established.

### ***Religious Religion***

This existential and spiritual focus on the person of Christ makes the Christian religion a religious religion again. Christianity as metaphysics, as a culture of division of power, as openness to the discovery of the world in breadth and depth, as art and culture, this Christianity is an essential part of Europe and the world. But this Christianity seems to be threatened or at least tempted by a loss of meaning. Especially in East-Central Europe, it is often instrumentalized as a political religion for goals that are foreign to its religious nature and used as a reason for nationalism and xenophobia. Against such a religious expression of Christianity, the most original meaning in word and deed must be pointed out. Again, Paul in his prison letter to the Philippians:

*"In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: [...] he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness." (Phil 2:5-7)*

Christians and churches in Hungary—and elsewhere—are today experiencing a turbulent world with many uncertainties and are accessing or resorting to cultural and political models that promise the most autonomy and stability for them. But they are—and I myself am—ready, through Paul's Letters, to be admonished to use Kundera's term from the slowness of prison, to risk alienation from the traditional forms and contents of Christianity and to abandon themselves to the adventurous search for its original message.

From this point of view, a "restless Hungary" is not something I would like to avoid, but on the contrary, something in which I would like to place my deepest hope—with my fellow Christians in Hungary, and in Central and Eastern Europe, too.