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## 1968 in Hungary

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The year 1968 started with a kind of slight hope. After a year of discussion among leading economists, a so-called 'new economic mechanism' was introduced in Hungary, beginning on 1 January of the year. The tight central control was loosened, the directors of factories were granted the right to take initiative, and prices were allowed to differentiate. Those who still believed in Marx's theory hoped that after the economic reform political reform will follow, since the base determines the superstructure. We (my friends and I) were rather sceptical. After the defeat of the revolution of 1956, the opening for any kind of political freedom seemed to be impossible unless a miracle happened.

In this atmosphere of slight hope and overarching scepticism the miracle did happen: the Prague Spring. The unexpected good news immediately changed our perspective. Even sceptics began to hope. We presupposed that the main cause of our defeat in 1956 was the absence of synchrony. The Polish 'uprising' had already ended by the time our revolution started, and no other 'socialist' country joined us.

The Prague Spring carried the promise that this time it would be different. The idea of 'socialism with a human face' and the possible institutionalisation of this idea in Czechoslovakia revived the hope vested in the reform of 'socialism' in the direction of pluralism and the institutionalisation of personal liberties. In this light one began to believe that our economic reform could also contribute to the transformation of Hungarian society in the spirit of the ideas of the Prague Spring.

This was the last moment of the illusion of intellectuals who were still clinging to the possibility of reforming the 'socialist' system towards a kind of democracy. I would not say that many shared this illusion, yet I and some of my friends still did. Prague became the city of our great expectations. We appreciated even the caution of the Czech and Slovak actors, an attitude very different from ours in 1956. Perhaps, this time, we would succeed.

All of us (I, my friends and other intellectuals in Hungary) followed all the steps, all the ups and downs of the events in Prague, constantly oscillating be-

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tween hope and fear. We clung to any reassuring news coming from there. As in the case of all political daydreams, our hopes surpassed our fears. This confidence in the future lasted until July.

After an Italian tour with friends we finally arrived in Venice at the end of July and decided to stay there for a few days. Yet, already on the first day of our stay posters appeared on the streets of Venice with the news of the concentration of the Soviet army at the Czechoslovakian border. We immediately lost our interest in Venice and Italy, we were terrified, switching from hope to despair. Yet, in a few days the immediate danger seemed to be gone. We were relieved, for the last time.

In between, in May, another story developed in Paris. A new political actor, 'the new left' entered the political stage. As the news and the stories reached Budapest, I immediately became enthusiastically involved in the new political actor not just practically, but also theoretically. My immediate political interest, and desire, clung further to the possibility of change in Eastern Europe in the direction of 'socialism with a human face', but as far as the future in general was concerned I rested my hope more and more on the 'new left'. I was attracted by the idea of the revolutionary transformation of everyday life, I found it a relief to see a 'left' not just independent of a Soviet model, but also hostile to it. I felt great sympathy for the new communities, which were putting emphasis on new human relationships, a new culture, on women's liberation.

I remained an Eastern European in not sharing the new leftist hostility against market or 'consumerism', since I lived in a country without a market and without the possibility to satisfy some elementary human needs—the need for personal freedom included.

These two commitments, one for Prague and the other for Paris, became combined in my mind. I included my new leftism into the project of the Prague Spring, 'socialism with a human face'. The ideas of the revolution of everyday life, of self-determination, of self-management, became constituent parts of my conception of socialism with a human face. I even described my own project and called it the 'great republic'. It was conceived as a 'free' republic, governed by two houses. One house would be constituted by general elections with the participation of several parties. The other should be the house of 'councils'. I presupposed a free market, yet communal proprietors as competitors. Thus I tried to combine 'socialism' (communal property) with political freedom and pluralism, alias a 'human face'.

This project was an entirely irrational utopia, whereas the hope that the Soviet regime would 'allow' another kind of 'socialism' to take roots was just an illusion. My project of the 'great republic', like so many similar ones, combined an illusion and a utopia. My utopia lasted longer, while my illusions were soon lost. On 21 August 1968.

When we (György and Maria Márkus, Vilmos Sós and Zádor Tordai) left for the Summer School in Korčula, Yugoslavia, on 14 August, it looked as if the

dangers threatening Czechoslovakia were now over. The theoretical discussions went on as usual, this time mainly about the student movements, and the new left in general. I met friends and made new acquaintances. We were swimming, talking, eating good fish.

On the morning of 21 August I appeared on time at the venue for the morning discussion, as usual. Yet nothing was usual anymore. People gathered in small groups discussing the news, the invasion of the Soviet army and its allies, among them Hungary, into Czechoslovakia. All dreams of reform were over, all illusions were lost, no 'socialism with a human face' seemed to be possible anymore, and we would never see a political change in our life. There remained some 'optimist' expectations about 'negotiations', yet not for me and for my friends. We knew that all was over. Our life was in a sense a deadlock, a mistake. Something else needed to begin. But for whom? And where?

The first question was obvious: what should we do? We should surely express first our solidarity with the Czech and the Slovak people. And we should turn also to the public opinion of democratic people and governments, demanding them to protest. This happened. A text of protest was formulated. All delegations (albeit not all participants) signed the document of general protest. One person after another from all counties came onto the stage to show their personal grief and outrage. A delegate from Czechoslovakia wept on the stage, crying 'all is over, all is over for good'. (Remark: I met him in the early 1990s in Bratislava as the director of a philosophical institute—there are still some happy endings.)

After having signed the common declaration, we, five Hungarians, decided that this was not enough, given that our own country had also participated in the military action. We must protest as citizens of this country against the action of our own country. Thus, we formulated a protest declaration of our own. It was not an easy task, for we needed to adopt the position of 'socialism with a human face', of an illusion we just lost. After signing our own text we offered it to France Press, and they published it the next day.

We decided to leave the Summer School immediately and return to Hungary by the first train. We expected imprisonment or at least the loss of our jobs. At this time, however, the punishment was less serious (loss of passports etc.). They waited another 5 years, until the death of György Lukács, to punish us.

Whatever happened, the so-called 'Korčula declaration' became regarded as the first open protest against the Kádár regime since 1957. It went down as such in the chronicle of the history of the Hungarian opposition. Not just because it was a protest, not because of its text, but because it was offered to a 'bourgeois agency', the enemy of the Hungarian government. This counted as a public rebellion.

The life of the members of our group, already then the 'Budapest School', changed immediately. And so did the life and the attitude of several other Hungarian intellectuals. Until August 1968 we were system critics, but by far not an opposition. The economist who worked out the 'new economic mechanism' addressed not only party members, but, by definition, also party officials. Many of

the intellectual critics of the system courted also Czech and Slovak communist leaders, functionaries, such as Alexander Dubček, encouraging them to initiate and to introduce common political reforms.

After August 1968, at least in Hungary, former system critics were split. The majority accepted the status quo, as they abandoned all hopes for reforms. A small minority chose, under the same conditions, another path. They also abandoned all hope, yet precisely because of this they also abandoned any kind of loyalty to the system. They became the opposition.

The activity of the self-organised opposition in Hungary began by distributing and signing declarations, protesting against the repression of Czechoslovak intellectuals after August 1968, and making it public outside Hungary. This was the beginning of a development that continued with the emerging samizdat culture, the establishment of a second, alternative 'public sphere'. Thus, August 1968 became the cemetery of the last remains of legitimacy of the Hungarian communist regime.