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GYÖRGY LUKÁCS AND GÁBOR KOVÁCS

Researching the life and times of Imre Lakatos, it gradually became clear that the intelligence services of several countries, on both sides of the Iron Curtain, took an active interest in him.

When I learned that he was among the first of György Lukács's disciples after the Second World War, along with István Király, Leo Lám /1/, and József Szigeti, I paid close attention to information on Lakatos' relationship with Lukács. /2/ In retrospect, I regretted not having asked Lukács about Lakatos, when I met him in 1967. But then I knew nothing about Lakatos and even less about Gábor Kovács.

By sheer coincidence, according to a newscast as I write, Juana Bautista Rodriguez is marking her 125th birthday in Cuba and she is of sound mind and body. It is, therefore, all the more tempting to think of Lukács still living on Belgrade Quay and enjoying a Cohiba. He, by the way, showed a lively interest in what was happening on that island, which I visited the previous year.

He was pleased to hear that several of his books were texts at Havana University, while the same could not be said for Hungary's universities.

For a man of 82, he was not only keenly interested in world events, but was well informed, obviously not from the Party daily. Clearly, he was never an "official philosopher," an oxymoron if ever there was one, and his take on events would be followed with interest today by many people. Perhaps by now he would have found time to write his autobiography. One wonders if Lakatos would have deserved mention.

From his forced exile in Romania after the 1956 Revolution, Lukács wrote Gyula Ortutay about how attentive the Romanian comrades were, "seeking to guess our very thoughts." /3/ Humor is not something one readily associates with Lukács, but he did have one /4/ and a flair for Aesopian language.

The latter, I think, he learned the hard way, in Stalin's Russia. As is known, the Romanians were not the first in the endeavor to find out what Lukács was thinking. The NKVD showed considerable interest in Lukács before and after his 1941 arrest in Moscow and even after his return to Hungary following World War Two. /5/

We also know the regard his comrades like László Rudas, Ernő Gerő, and Ernő Szücs had for him./6/ But at least they were consistent, unlike disciples like József Szigeti, who had been the first to put Lakatos in touch with Lukács, after quizzing him on what he had read by him. It was sometime in the fall of 1945 that Szigeti ran into his friend, István Király, who was accompanied by Lakatos. When told that Lakatos was studying philosophy, "I brought up *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein*, which was suitable to assess the depth of his knowledge." Lakatos passed muster, although while he "knew Kant, he failed to grasp Hegel." /7/

This indicates that Lakatos had had good teachers and contacts in Debrecen, thanks to whom he could read Lukács's early Marxist works in the original German. Those who have written that they could detect Lukács's influence on Lakatos' post-1956 writings proved perceptive. Among them, no one has done more to investigate the similarities between the "philosophical thinking" of Lukács and Lakatos than László Ropolyi. /8/

But little is known about Imre Lakatos' personal contact with Lukács. Most Lukács biographers don't even mention this nexus; the disciple István Hermann's slim volume is an exception.

When I asked Dénes Zoltai about Lakatos and Lukács, all he could say was that Lakatos, whom he had not known personally, never attended Lukács's university seminars, and this he knew first hand, having been a regular attendant.

The memoirs of György Magosh, an early Debrecen friend of the Lipsitz family, reveal Lakatos, whose birthname was Lipsitz, as a my-way-or-no-way sort of fellow and he even tried this with Lukács. /9/

"With characteristic aggressive boastfulness, Lakatos asked [Lukács], who did not take kindly to such airs, why Marx's nonsense like *Herr Vogt* was published in Moscow," recalled Szigeti. Lukács squelched the 23-year-old, who "gulped, and then all the way home tried to explain himself." /10/

Payback time was down the road.

Lakatos was a student in Hungary's prestigious Eötvös College after the war where guest speakers included Lukács and József Révai. The latter was in charge of the communist party's (and later, the country's) ideological and cultural matters. Fellow students noted the easy familiarity Lakatos enjoyed with these men, and both Éva Lutter and Vilma Balázs

recalled the arguments Lakatos had with Lukács and Révai, which they had personally witnessed.

Károly Urbán, who had access to Lakatos' anonymous articles published in the communist party's daily, *Szabad Nép*, said that it is quite clear from those pieces that Lakatos favored an early, if not immediate transition to the dictatorship of the proletariat after the war.

Lukács, on the other hand, somewhat like Révai, favored a lengthy transition period and not for tactical, but, rather, for practical reasons.

Near the end of 1947, and well before the full-scale introduction of the dictatorship, a meeting of the Valóság Circle was held in a downtown café. (Valóság /Reality/ was a leftist monthly periodical.) One of the organizers, the literary historian István Király, mentioned this incident in several interviews./11/

> "As I have mentioned, I belonged to Lukács's circle of close pupils. This relationship changed, however, when three of us in this circle, Imre Lakatos, Árpád Szabó and myself, launched a debate, in public to boot. At the end of 1947, we organized a meeting of the Valóság Circle in the Opera Café and attacked Lukács's ideology. We invited only those people – there were some fifty in all – who were known to be, for whatever reason, dissatisfied with Lukács's approach. […] The head of the party's cultural department, Gyula Kállai, gave Lakatos and me a verbal reprimand because we went public with a disagreement within the Party. Lukács took a principled position and did not take umbrage at our having criticized him, but at our not having been *partinost* in starting a cliquish *kaffe klatsch*." /12/

József Szigeti also mentioned the meeting in his autobiography. He himself was not present and had only heard about it from Lázár. According to him, the venue was the Abbázia Café. (The two cafés were only a few blocks apart, along Andrássy Avenue.) According to this version, Lakatos and Király gathered "ultra-Leftists to launch a frontal attack against Lukács and his views on literature. Lakatos went so far in his demagoguery as to accuse Lukács of wanting to restore Weimarian democracy."

I have not been able to find out how much contact there was between Lukács and Lakatos after this incident and after the latter left Eötvös College.

In September 1948, when he was sent to attend the conference of the World Federation of Scientific Workers in Prague, Lakatos sent Lukács his greetings. The sole written communication the Lukács Archives has from Lakatos to Lukács is this postcard from Prague. After signing it, he got others at the conference, like J.D. Bernal, J.G. Crowther and Ernst Kahane, to sign it as well.

While Lakatos was studying at Lomonosov University in Moscow in 1949, László Rudas published his broadside against Lukács in the periodical *Társadalmi Szemle* (Social review). Considerably later, it became known that Mátyás Rákosi was behind the attack, as the correspondence between him and Rudas showed; it was not as if Rudas needed encouragment; the Party boss only greenlighted the move.

However, what is less well known is the amount of assistance Lakatos gave Rudas in assembling Lukács's "deviations," giving Rudas more ammunition. Rudas' son-in-law, Miklós Molnár, said that Lakatos was a frequent guest at the Rudas residence before leaving for Moscow and others reported that Lakatos himself boasted of having aided Rudas.

Ágnes Heller, who had met Lakatos only after his release from the concentration camp at Recsk, said that once Lukács himself told her that "Lakatos dug up quotes from my writings for Rudas to use in his attack."

She added that Lukács's reaction was a resigned "So much for disciples."

In light of this, I found it interesting to read in Szigeti's autobiography that Lakatos, from the very start, had been more interested in meeting Rudas than Lukács, which surprised Szigeti himself, too, at the time. /14/

Why was Lakatos arrested? This was one of the most fascinating aspects of the research /15/ As it turned out, Lakatos was not only out to hurt Lukács, but also to dethrone Révai as the country's ideological czar. However, my research led me to strongly suspect that by his planned attack on Révai, Lakatos unwittingly saved Lukács's neck.

Judging by the correspondence between Rákosi and Rudas, it is not clear just how far the former wanted to go in striking a blow against the renowned thinker (while sending a strong message to the country's intelligentsia as a whole). Once it became known – and this would have surely reached Rákosi's ears, in Vladimir Farkas' view /16/ – what Lakatos was up to, Rákosi, known to be fast on the uptake, realized how things could easily get out of hand

and how such criticism could target him as well. After all, there were sentences in Rákosi's post-war speeches that were alarmingly similar to the Révai quotes Lakatos was assembling.

A week after Lukács' 65th birthday, Lakatos, back in Budapest from Moscow, was arrested by the political police and several months later was incarcerated in the concentration camp located in the mountains near the village of Recsk, in north-eastern Hungary.

After the death of Stalin in 1953, a review was ordered and most political prisoners were gradually released. The Recsk camp was closed in the fall of that year. But before the release of the inmates, Ernő Gerő, with his fine eye for detail, ordered the "instruction of informers used in the camps as to their future conduct and cooperation."/17/

Among the declassified dossiers in the Historical Archives of the State Security Services, there is the following secret police document:

> "On July 10, 1953, 'Zárai' was recruited on the basis of compromising data and given the codename 'Gábor Kovács.' […] 'Zárai' behaved well in the camp, associating only with Leftists and ex-Party members. In 1949–1950, 'Zárai' was close to Lukács' circle and in 1952–1953 there was an operational need to gather intelligence on these people." […] He mapped out György Lukács' circle, all of them Right-wing philosophers. He gave us valuable information about them."

In case it is not already clear, that helpful person was Imre Lakatos. Unfortunately, the file contains very few 'Gábor Kovács' reports, none of which contain information about Lukács and/or his associates and students.

Lakatos, working at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, informed on a wide circle of academics and intellectuals, not just Lukács and those in contact with him. Obviously, he had contact with Lukács after 1953, but it is not known just for how long and how frequently.

The next time Lakatos was mentioned in connection with Lukács was on September 10, 1956, only six weeks before the outbreak of the revolt against Soviet rule. The occasion was the debate on the doctoral dissertation of a man called Elemér Kerékgyártó, who, like Lakatos, was also from Debrecen. He attacked the philosopher Sándor Karácsony, who taught at Debrecen University, and whom both of them had known personally.

One of the official opponents was József Szigeti. Lakatos, there as a member of the audience, tore into Kerékgyártó's arguments.

"We don't want any part of the views of Lakatos, the man who stabbed György Lukács in the back," said Szigeti after Lakatos sat down. This was the same Szigeti who had done just that to Lukács in the course of the Lukács debate in 1949–1950.

"Lakatos was sputtering, saying this was denunciation and demanded that Szigeti explain himself," György Krassó recalled. /18/

At this point, György Kontra noted, Ortutay, chairing the session, called Szigeti to order over his "denunciatory remarks aimed at Lakatos." /19/

Thus, in closing, I can only echo Lukács's words: So much for disciples, indeed.

Notes

/1/ Leo Lám (1924-1978) changed his name to György Lázár shortly after the end of the war. He is not to be confused with the communist functionary of the same name, who was Hungary's premier between 1975 and 1987.

/2/ There were many disciples, but the initial foursome consisted of István Király, Imre Lakatos, Leo Lám, and József Szigeti.

In his *Lukács György*, István Szerdahelyi did not even mention Lakatos. István Hermann, himself an early disciple, did not mention Lakatos in his 1974 book on Lukács, but did in his 1985 Lukács biography. In the former, he cited only Király, Lám/Lázár and Szigeti, to be soon joined by Dénes Zoltai, Ágnes Heller, István Mészáros, Vilma Mészáros, Miklós Almási, Ferenc Bródy and Miklós Krassó. In the latter book, he gave special mention to Lakatos as one of the first of Lukács's post-war disciples. (*Lukács György élete* /The life of György Lukács/, p.165.)

István Király mentioned the quartet in his *Útkeresések* (Explorations), Budapest, 1990, p. 407.

According to the scholarly, multi-volume work published in 1981, *A magyar irodalom története 1945–1975* (The history of Hungarian literature 1945–1975), edited by Miklós Béládi, Lukács himself considered Szigeti, Lám, Király and Lakatos his disciples at that early stage. (p. 99)

Perhaps the fullest list is in Szerdahelyi's *A Magyar Esztétika története 1945-1975*, /The history of Hungarian aesthetics/, Budapest, 1976, p. 27.

Arpad Kadarkay's excellent *Georg Lukács: Life, Thought, and Politics* made no mention of Lakatos and neither did Lukács himself deem him worthy of mention in *Record of a Life*, (Edited by István Eörsi, Verso Editions, 1983.)

/3/ Gyula Ortutay: *Napló 2* (Diary, Vol. 2), Budapest 2009, pp. 157-158. Ortutay was a leading academic ethnographer, and a 2nd-tier crypto-communist official. His 3-volume diary offers a valuable behind-the-scenes look at the life of the top functionaries of the country.

/4/ See, for example, the interview with Lukács's adopted son, Ferenc Jánossy, in the periodical *Medvetánc*, 1986/4-1987/1.

/5/ Several studies have been published on this in Hungarian; all owe much to the research done by Aleksandr Stikhalin and Vycheslav Sereda, originally published in Moscow. The writings of László Sziklai and László Illés brought the material to the attention of the Hungarian public.

There is considerable controversy concerning a volume titled *Die Säuberung - Moskau 1936* (The cleansing - Moscow 1936), published in Hamburg, Germany, in 1991. I am familiar with its content thanks to Professor Lee Congdon of James Madison University, an American expert on the life and work of Lukács. It gives special meaning to Lukács's saying that he does not mind an auto-da-fé as long as he does not have to be present. But having said that, I do not wish to make light of the matter, although one must keep in mind the city and the year before leaping to conclusions. I gather that Lukács sought to downplay the "thought crimes" of those accused, while stressing the deviations of those already in the clutches of the thought police. Lukács comes off better than some of his German comrades; Lakatos was not alone in being both bright and base.

(And Lukács's *Schadenfreude* over the arrest of Béla Kun I found hateful precisely because I was keeping the place and the year in mind.)

/6/ Gerő made disparaging remarks about Lukács, Szücs's codename for him in his reports to Moscow was "Banker boy," and Rudas' enmity for Lukács went back decades. I discuss these in my *Chocolate and Chess: Unlocking Lakatos*, Akadémiai Kiadó, 2010. The book devotes chapters to hitherto classified materials on Imre Lakatos, obtained from the American F.B.I., Britain's M.I.5, and the Hungarian communist-era secret police.

/7/ József Szigeti: *Intellektuális önéletrajzom* (My intellectual autobiography), Budapest 2000, p. 351.

/8/ László Ropolyi: "Lakatos and Lukács" in: George Kampis, Ladislav Kvasz, and Michael Stöltzner (Eds.): *Appraising Lakatos: Mathematics, Methodology, and the Man*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002, pp. 303-337.

/9/ György M. Magosh: *Vadfa* (Wild tree), Budapest, 1994, pp. 108-109.

/10/ Szigeti, *op. cit.*, p. 362.

/11/ See, for example, Judit Csáki and Dezső Kovács: *Rejtőzködő legendárium* (Hiding legend), Budapest, 1990, p. 50.

/12/ Király interviewed by István Szerdahelyi, in *Kritika*, No. 4, 1981.

Árpád Szabó told me he had not been present at the debate.

/13/ Szigeti, *op. cit.*, pp. pp.387–389.

/14/ *Op. cit*. pp. 352-353.

/15/ Chapter 12 in *Chocolate and Chess* is devoted to this issue.

/16/ The late Vladimir Farkas gave me invaluable assistance in interpreting various, previously classified, ÁVH and communist party documents, for which I remain grateful.

/17/ Valéria Révai: *Törvénytelen szocializmus* (Unlawful socialism), Budapest, 1991, pp.138-139.

/18/ The György Krassó interview in the Oral History Archives of the 1956 Institute, No. 651.

/19/ This incident is covered in detail in Chapter 14 of my book, and I take this opportunity to again thank Dr. György Kontra, without whose meticulous notes the story of the fiasco of the Kerékgyártó debate simply could not have been written.

To my regret, Ortutay's diary only mentioned the affair as coming up on the following day, but did not report on the event itself.