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LIVING WITH LUKÁCS

Somewhat by chance, György Lukács came to play a significant role in my career, and my life. As a doctoral student in the late 1960s, I was searching for a dissertation topic. My advisers knew that I had learned Hungarian while serving in the U.S. Army, and they suggested that I make use of the language in whatever research I elected to undertake. Although Lukács was certainly known in scholarly and intellectual circles, he and his work had not yet become cottage industries; one of my professors therefore encouraged me to choose some aspect of his intellectual biography as my subject.

I knew that I would have to conduct my research in Budapest, so I applied for, and received, a research grant from the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX). My family and I arrived in Budapest in August of 1970 and the Institute for Cultural Relations assigned me to the Ervin Szabó Library, where László Remete had agreed to serve as my adviser. I spoke with him from time to time, but in the main I worked on my own, primarily at the Széchenyi Library, located at the time on the Múzeum körút. Lukács was then in the last year of his life, but it was not until the spring of 1971 that I felt sufficiently familiar with his writings to seek an interview. Somehow, I do not now remember how, I succeeded in arranging a meeting with Ferenc Fehér and Ágnes Heller. Mr. Fehér was particularly cordial and helpful; he told me he would do what he could to arrange an interview, but that Lukács was very ill and approaching the end of his life. I was present at the gravesite when, in June 1971, he was laid to rest.

These were the Kádár years, but after the communist leader had taken his revenge on Imre Nagy and those who had sided with the 1956 Revolution, he presided over a relatively liberal regime. In any event, for those, like me, who held an American passport and had access to the dollar, life in Budapest was pleasant and instructively different from life in the United States. Some who were on the research exchange with me—especially if they were Hungarian-born—were convinced that the political police were monitoring our every move. Perhaps so, but I was not Hungarian and had no personal connections in the country. I had, to be sure, served in the Army Security Agency, but no one at the Cultural Institute or elsewhere ever brought the matter up or treated me with suspicion.

On my journey home in August 1971, I made a stop in London, where Arnold Hauser received me at a moment when he was recovering from a heart attack. Hauser had been a young member of the now famous Sunday Circle that formed around Lukács and Béla Balázs during the Great War. He provided me with insight into the personal dynamics of that remarkable group of intellectuals. By that time, however, I had decided to broaden my research to the entire "second reform" (to borrow Zoltán Horváth's term) or "Great" generation (born between 1875 and 1905). I entitled my completed work "Beyond the 'Hungarian Wasteland': A Study in the Ideology of National Regeneration, 1900-1919"—it was essentially a study of Endre Ady, Oszkár Jászi, and Lukács.

I eventually published the Lukács chapter in the journal *Survey*, sponsored by the International Association for Cultural Freedom, the successor to the anticommunist Congress for Cultural Freedom, two of whose leading lights were members of the Great Generation: Arthur Koestler and Michael Polanyi. That article was widely read and helped to make my name known in the scholarly community and beyond. I began to receive letters—from scholars like Daniel Bell, who had maintained a long-standing interest in Lukács, and from well-informed people like Alex Bandy, soon to become AP correspondent in Budapest and a close friend. I was now, in short, identified as a Lukács scholar, and one who could read Hungarian.

In 1972, as everyone knows, a valise containing Lukács's pre-1917 manuscripts and correspondence was discovered in the Deutsche Bank of Heidelberg; Lukács had deposited it there on 7 November 1917, the day of the Bolshevik Revolution, or rather coup d'état. I knew instantly that a full and authoritative intellectual biography of the young Lukács had suddenly become a possibility, but I had accepted a position in the department of history at Madison College (Harrisonburg, Virginia), a school that placed greater emphasis on teaching than on research. When, however, I applied for and received research grants from IREX and Fulbright-Hays, the College permitted me to accept. My family and I returned to Budapest for the 1977-78 academic year.

Because I had published a series of articles on Lukács and other members of his generation of intellectuals, I was not completely unknown to Hungarian scholars. It was not long before I established contact with György Litván, who became a friend and from whom I learned much about Jászi and the entire generation. István Hermann, a former Lukács student, lived across Bocskai út from us, and through him I met Kristóf Nyíri, the brilliant philosopher with

whom I struck up what was to be a lasting friendship. I came to know and to gain insights too from Miklós Lackó, Erzsébet Vezér, Éva Gábor, and others. On a brief trip to Vienna, I met and spoke with Tibor Hanák, who knew Lukács's work well but was persona non grata in Hungary, because, as I recall, he worked for Radio Free Europe.

On most days I made my way to Belgrád rkp. 2, where Katalin Lakos and a very small staff (her mother, I think) presided over the Archives. Lukács's papers were not then very organized—if they were organized at all. Nevertheless, I managed to see most of what I needed—though I remember being told that "Gelebtes Denken" did not exist! One of my fondest memories of those days is of sitting at the great man's desk, contemplating a bust of Goethe. Those were the days before computers, so I had to take notes on cards and, at the end of my stay, persuade someone at the Cultural Institute to sign a permit allowing me to take them out of the country.

One of the benefits of studying the young Lukács is the contribution it makes to one's education. Lukács's extraordinary command of literature, philosophy, and sociology made retracing his intellectual itinerary a voyage of discovery. I read Max Weber, Georg Simmel, Ernst Troeltsch, Ferdinand Tönnies, Paul Ernst, Emil Lask, Thomas Mann, Henrik Ibsen, Friedrich Hebbel, Thomas Masaryk, Martin Buber, Ernst Bloch, Georges Sorel, Boris Savinkov, and Kant/Hegel/Marx; along with Hungarians such as Ady, Balázs, Mihály Babits, Lajos Fülep, Anna Lesznai, Leó Popper, Béla Zalai, and Ervin Szabó. Most important from a personal point of view, I read, or re-read, all of Dostoevsky's major novels. They were important to the young Lukács, and to me. In time, I converted to that profound writer's Faith—Russian Orthodoxy.

In 1983, the University of North Carolina Press published my book, *The Young Lukács*. My principal purpose, I wrote in the book's preface, was to retravel with Lukács his road to Marx. To that end, I directed attention to the interrelationship between the ideas he entertained, the world in which he lived, and the conditions of his personal existence. Lukács's understanding of Simmel, Dostoevsky, and Hegel, I argued, was profoundly influenced by the world of fin de siècle Europe, the Great War, and the Russian Revolution. And his own ideas were in the most literal sense expressions of his relationships with three women—Irma Seidler, Ljena Grabenko, and Gertrúd Bortstieber.

This was my way of arguing for the hermeneutical importance of context when writing intellectual history; texts, I had come to think, do not exhaust their own meanings. Not everyone

agreed, of course, but in general the book received favorable reviews. Some, especially those sympathetic to Marxism, took issue with my critique of *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein*, a brilliant work, but one, I maintained, that laid the groundwork for tyranny. I thought then, and I think now, that the young Lukács made a wrong turn when he converted to communism; nevertheless, my admiration for his intellect, seriousness, and breathtaking erudition has never wavered.

In 1985, the "Georg Lukács Gedenkkomitee" invited me to Budapest for the conference celebrating the 100th anniversary of Lukács's birth. There I met and had an opportunity to discuss matters of mutual interest with scholars from around the world. Before going to Budapest, I attended another Lukács (and Ernst Bloch) conference in Dubrovnik. I benefited from both gatherings and included some of what I learned in my next book, *Exile and Social Thought: Hungarian Intellectuals in Germany and Austria, 1919-1933* (Princeton University Press, 1991).

I devoted one long chapter of that book to Lukács's life and work in Austrian and German exile. It was largely critical in nature, but again I could not but admire his erudition and intellectual sophistication—even greater, in my view, than that of Marx himself. Since then, I have had occasion to write (again) about my favorite Lukács work, *A modern dráma fejlődésének története,* and about the recently discovered *Chvostismus und Dialektik*, a spirited defense of *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* that Lukács wrote (but never mentioned subsequently) in 1925 or 1926.

Looking back over what is now four decades, I can see that my work on Lukács deepened my understanding of European intellectual history, helped me to think seriously about my own views of politics and life, made it possible for me to travel widely, and brought many valued friends and colleagues into my life. It has been a memorable and rewarding journey.