BUDAPEST 1945: THE YEAR ZERO

by John Lukacs

In my stepfather's cellar I was waiting for the Russians. I was 20 years old, a deserter, with false military identity papers; if I were to be found out by the National Socialists or by the field gendarmerie, I could be shot or hanged on the spot. I had left my unit, an anti-aircraft battery in the Hungarian army, in November of 1944. The bedraggled remnants of the army were about to be shipped westward, eventually to Germany, together with the retreating collaborationist Arrow Cross government. To the east of Budapest the Russians were less than 40 miles away. We thought that they would march into the city in a few days. Together with my mother and a dozen relatives and friends, we moved into that cellar, a subterranean office and warehouse owned by my stepfather. But the Russians progressed very slowly. They did not enter the city until they had surrounded it completely.

On the night before Christmas the first Russians moved into the western hills of the city, on the Buda side. All day we had heard the dull thudding of guns from that unaccustomed direction. The city was dark, the Danube carried the corpses of Jews who had been shot on the quays the night before; but people were still carrying small Christmas trees and packages home.

Snow fell on Christmas Day again. We now knew (and not merely heard) that the Russians had encircled Buda. We knew this not from Radio Budapest but from the BBC, to which we could still tune in on our small battery-powered radio.

The Russians were cautious. Each day they advanced through 50, perhaps 100 blocks. Each day the Germans moved back their remaining tanks and trucks, trying to stable them in the narrow streets of the inner city. They had no anti-aircraft artillery left. When daylight came, the Russian planes began circling over the broken rooftops of the city, dropping bundles of small bombs on anything that moved, and on every kind of vehicle, including burnt-out wrecks. Gradually the scenery of the inner city became a last encampment of the Third Reich, an Augean stable of what was left of military metal. In the cellar we huddled, hungry and cold. After a week or so we began to hear the Russian loudspeakers at night: songs, proclamations, inviting the Hungarian soldiery to surrender. I was more than game to surrender: I had wanted to be liberated from the Germans for a long time, preferably by the British or the Americans, or now by the Russians, it mattered not which.

And finally they arrived in the city. As we stood in the doorway, peering out, Russian soldiers came by, one by one. They came in single file, close to the peeling, bulging, crumbling, shot-pitted walls of the dark apartment buildings. The first of them was the first Russian I had ever met, and the nicest Russian I was to meet for a long time. He was an officer, wearing a tightly padded uniform, a fur cap, with large binoculars hung around his neck. He had horn-rimmed glasses and a large mouth. He looked like a Weimar-Berlin film image of a Red Army officer, the kind of Russian who speaks German, likes chess and children and Beethoven. As matters turned

out, a rare kind.

It was 9:45 on the morning of January 18, 1945. Zero Minute, Zero Year.

After the Russians arrived, all kinds of interesting affiliations formed. The oddest kinds of people joined the Communist Party. They included a rich stockbroker friend of ours, a tough-minded capitalist if ever there was one. He was a hardheaded (rather than hardfaced) man who made out well not only after the war but during it, including during the siege. One could always be sure that F. had a car when no one else did, that he had a black-market supply of gasoline, food, fuel, clothes, *napoléons d'or*, etc. In short, a merchant adventurer, a master opportunist.

I had a certain liking for him, for he was not ungenerous; he had an appreciation of good books and a fine sense of humor. I told him that he was wrong to join the Communist Party, and I tried to explain why. That it was morally wrong, and bad form, I did not say, partly because he was an older man, and also because I knew that it would cut no ice with him. I explained my theory of the antiquated nature of communism and of its evident failure in the long run. He listened patiently, but I saw that he was a bit bored with it; it was too theoretical for him, too idealistic perhaps.

Yet he was not as hardheaded as he thought he was. The few advantages of his Party membership were not worth the game. He thought that his quick and shameless adjustment to the powers at hand would provide for his independent comforts in years ahead; he convinced himself not only that communism came to Hungary to stay but also that his kind could stay in Hungary under communism. He was wrong. He mistook the wave of the present for the wave of the future—the occupational hazard of opportunists, including the most talented ones. And so eventually he retreated from communism: In 1949—after two years of unnecessarily protracted expectations and anxieties—he bought himself a legal exit passport for a large sum (obtainable for much less money to non-communists two years before) and emigrated to Australia, where he would die on a ski slope at the age of 60.

In the dark December of 1944 I brushed against one of the self-conscious secret resistance conventicles that—alas, too late—were finally sprouting in Budapest and that, for once, were mostly composed of what could be called professional intellectuals: university people, journalists, cultural officials of the former government, men and women on the fringes of cultural diplomacy. The leading figure of this group, J., was in his thirties, the son of respectable Calvinist gentry, dark, saturnine, and handsome except for his buck teeth, with the then relatively rare accomplishment of speaking English, having visited the United States on a government study grant before Pearl Harbor. An older friend had brought me to his wife's apartment. J. announced that he was a communist. This was before the Russians arrived. I was impressed. His announcement suddenly suggested a new kind of Hungary in which *this* kind of man might be an important personage as a communist. I thought that J. was a very knowledgeable Machiavellian, a younger statesman of sorts, who would soon reach some

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kind of high position in a new Hungarian regime.

After the Russians had arrived, I met J. sporting a proletarian cloth cap, in Lenin's style, day in and day out, in the streets as well as inside their unheated apartment. Perhaps because he had studied the 1917 strategy of the great Lenin, J. struck out for a career not so much within the Party itself (his membership in which he did not cease to flaunt) as within the organization of the Trade Unions—the Soviet track. The time was ripe, J. and his associates considered, to apply the union principle to all kinds of professions, especially to government and municipal offices—or, more accurately, the time was ripe to secure new and important positions for themselves through the impeccable instrument of Trade Unionism.

The Battle for Budapest. In late 1944, the Russian troops arrived, driving out the German and collaborationist armies.

Besides providing leadership for my suddenly diminished family—my stepfather was hit by a shell on the street during the last days of the siege and died after three days of agony—I had not much to do. The university had not yet reopened; at any rate I had few courses to complete. Every day I trudged through the ruins of the desolate city to the headquarters of the Association of Trade Unions, where one of the attractions was the free bean soup distributed to the staff every noon. Very soon I suspected that not much would come out of this unionism. The older unions of printers and of metalworkers were already controlled by the communists. The order of the day was to let people like J. exist as long as they had no real power, which, indeed, was the case, except that J. and his friends did not know it. They were wholly preoccupied with their activities, having convinced themselves that playing at power was the same thing as the exercise of power—the occupational disease of bureaucrats and, even more, of intellectuals.

Very soon after arriving at the Association of Trade Unions I found that I had really nothing to do. Nor did the others. They, however, concealed this condition with a feverish activity of meetings, conferences, associations, and "workshops" (I have yet to encounter a "workshop" that has anything to do with work), often behind closed doors. It was my first experience of the kind of intellectual bureaucracy that followed the phase of intellectual bohemianism as surely as other phenomena of the 20th century followed those of the 19th. My colleagues were making paperwork for themselves; and they were taking their functions, paper functions, very seriously. After the siege there was in Budapest a shortage of everything, from flour to matches, even a shortage of water. Of paper, miraculously—or perhaps not so miraculously—there seemed to have been no shortage at all.

Already on the second day of my ap-

pearance at the Association of Trade Unions I found that the most febrile kinds of intrigues were forming: confidential meetings behind closed doors from which certain people were excluded, others suddenly admitted. All these bureaucratic war games were criss-crossed by plots and paths that may have come from somewhere but that surely led to nowhere. Indeed, within a year the Association of Trade Unions was gone; within five years J., the Early Communist, found himself in prison; another five years later he was acquitted, whereafter he was appointed to an important position within the government's export-import organization, having finally acquired the official limousine and the diplomatic passport—a communist pilgrim's progress, a not untypical Hungarian career in the middle of the 20th century.

Late in March the Americans arrived—an event that I must describe in some detail. According to the arrangements made at Yalta, there was to be an Allied Control Commission in each of the former Axis countries, composed of Soviet, British and American representatives, a political and a military mission. The Russians, of course, ruled the roost in Budapest, and everywhere else in Eastern Europe (just as the Americans ruled similar commissions, say, in Rome). In retrospect, this American and British presence in Hungary was so ephemeral (the mission left in 1947, after the peace treaty between the Allies and Hungary was signed) that in the long and tragic history of my native country it is hardly worth mentioning at all. This remains a fact; and yet, oddly enough, it was not quite that way. Something of that air of American omnipotence in 1945, the impression that the United States, in an unprecedented way, was the greatest power in the world, transpired throughout the globe, lighting even the gloomy and depressing skies over Budapest. There were perhaps not more than 200 Americans, fewer than 100 of them in uniform; yet somehow their presence in the capital seemed to be as evident, and almost as ubiquitous, as that of the Russians.

This condition was inseparable from the sudden and passionate Americanophilia of my countrymen, many of whom translated all of their expectations accordingly. Months before the war ended, hundreds, maybe thousands of people who knew some English daydreamed about getting a job with the British or the American missions. On the morning when the first Americans arrived, a nervous, teeming crowd of people besieged the entrances of the building they were to occupy; I heard that some people had arrived in the freezing dawn hours to get a first glimpse of the promised Americans in order to rush at them from favorable starting posts.

Presently, just about every American, whether high officer or private, became the acquisition of a Hungarian wife or mistress. The head of the military mission was a major general, a former governor of Oklahoma, who had his son posted to Budapest, where the latter was promptly annexed by a young bourgeoise, his father's ambitious secretary who had fought for her desk on the first day and won it by gleaming tooth and red-lacquered nail. They were subsequently married and left for the United States on a special military plane. What happened to her in Oklahoma I now wonder; at the time, her story was a miracle tale, one of the *fabliaux* of 1945, Year Zero.

I would have liked very much to be annexed to the Americans or to the British, but I did not participate in the crush and rush of the first days, not so much because it would have been demeaning but because I had suffered from intellectual ochlophobia, the fear of crowds, since an early age. I thought I'd write my own ticket—a

HUNGARY'S FATE: 1945–1956

In February 1945, the Allied leaders—Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Joseph Stalin—met in the Crimean city of Yalta to make plans for the postwar occupation of Nazi-dominated territories. But the fate of Hungary, like that of other East European countries, had already been largely decided. As early as December 31, 1944, the Soviet Union had established a provisional government in Hungary, which included parties from the non-communist left. Initially moderate, the Hungarian communists worked hard to rebuild the country, while pledging to guarantee democracy, private property, and small private industries. But poor showings in the first four elections prompted the Soviet-backed party to blackmail, intimidate, and even imprison popular opposition leaders.

In May 1949, after winning a carefully orchestrated election, the communists drafted a new constitution establishing Hungary as a "People's Rupublic." Mátyás Rákosi, the first secretary of the Worker's Party, launched ambitious nationalization and collectivization drives, all of which foundered. Facing widespread discontent, the regime adopted a "New Course" in 1953, and a new prime minister, Imre Nagy, discontinued collectivization and permitted the production of more consumer goods. A bitter power struggle between Nagy and Rákosi continued until 1955, when the reformer was expelled from the party and Rákosi and his successor, Ernö Gerö, put the nation back on a proper "Stalinist" course.

The Yalta Conference, February 4–11, 1945.

In October 1956, inspired by Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin, Hungarian students took to the streets demanding reforms. But the peaceful protest was met by police violence, and the demonstration escalated into an armed uprising. Calling in Soviet troops, Gerö created rifts within his own party, and Nagy was reinstated to head a coalition government. Moscow withdrew its troops and agreed to negotiate. But Nagy pressed his hand too far, demanding Hungary's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact and neutral status. The Soviet tanks rolled back into Hungary, reaching Budapest on November 4, and after several weeks of bloody fighting, the "National Communist" János Kádár stood at the helm of an obedient Soviet satellite.

resolution that, again, involved me in an enterprise in which nobler and baser purposes were mixed. Having recognized the futility of my association with the Association of Trade Unions, I spent a night at home, literally burning the candle at both ends (candles were rare and electricity still nonexistent), composing a political memorandum in English that I intended to hand over to an American diplomat of the first rank. The memorandum consisted of information that I thought was not available elsewhere, items involving misdeeds by the Russians or the communists. My idea was very simple. I would inform the Americans about such matters, not only for my country's benefit but also for my own.

Somehow I had secured a list of all American personnel in Budapest, wherefrom I deduced that the person I ought to contact was the first secretary of the legation. I presented myself at the legation about a week or so after it had established itself in Budapest. The line of supplicants and applicants had not much thinned, but the very fact that I asked for Mr. Squires by

A 1947 poster for Hungary's Three-Year Plan. The first socialist state plans in Eastern Europe were devoted to repairing the ravages of the war.

his name seemed to have made an impression on the Hungarian receptionist, who, after a moment of hesitation, took the small envelope containing my visiting card on which I had written, in impeccable English, something like this: "The bearer of this card would like to have the honor and the pleasure to discuss certain matters of interest with Mr. Squires."

I was admitted to Squires's office. He was, I vaguely recall, a large, affable man, not quite as diffident as his British counterpart would have been, but reflecting, rather, the peculiarly American compound of being both perplexed and incurious at the same time. I babbled something in English about how important it was that the American mission be properly informed about certain important matters. I do not remember his saying anything. I put the memorandum upon the table. He said, "What can I do for you?" or words to that effect. On a coffee table I saw copies of *Time* and *Life* magazines. I hadn't seen their likes for many years. I said something to the effect that I would be only too glad to furnish him with the most confidential, and accurate, kind of political information about developments in Hungary if he would let me have a small supply of these superb American journals. He told me to help myself. I felt that I had just achieved a great, an unimaginable coup. I clutched several issues of *Life* and *Time* to my chest. I floated homeward in a cloud of triumph. In our unheated dwelling, grimy and redolent of the saddening odor of poverty, I faced the ruined beauty of my Anglomaniac mother. "Guess what I have!" I said. My mother turned radiant. She could not believe my luck.

Squires was one of those rich Americans from a good family who had entered the foreign service in the '30s because it was a more interesting career than banking: a type that, I am sorry to say, has disappeared from the ranks of the American foreign service by now. This I recognized later, having also learned that his main interests included liquor and polo, a kind of period mix that makes me almost nostalgic. He seemed not very much interested in Hungarian politics, perhaps because he was smart enough to know that there was not much that the United States could or even should do. He was also enough of a man of the world to know how to disembarrass himself, in a smooth and professional way, of this young freak who, for all he knew, might be a Soviet or communist agent.

Eventually—and I cannot now remember exactly how—I found a less unwilling recipient of the kind of information that I had to offer. He was Rear Admiral William F. Dietrich, the third

in command of the American military mission: an honest navy officer of the old school, a practicing Catholic who abhorred communism without at first saying so, who would not only welcome my confidences in a fatherly manner but who, a year later, would be the person most responsible for getting me out of political trouble. Arranging for the transportation of my only suitcase in his personal car across the border to Austria (whereto I escaped), he then furnished me with the kind of character reference that ensured my receiving a priority visa to the United States once I presented myself to an American consulate in the West. In short, he may have saved my life.

By the time Admiral Dietrich and I had become friends, that is, by the summer of 1945, I knew many Americans in Budapest, at least by sight. There was not, as far as I can remember or ascertain, a mean one among them. To most of us, the Americans seemed the brightest, the smartest, and the best among all the human types who were to be found in Hungary in those crucial and tragic times; and, indeed, in many ways they were.

I can, however, recall two types of Americans who left unpleasant memories. They were not members of the American missions. Sometime in the late summer of 1945 the news that a visit to ruined Budapest promised certain paradisiacal prospects for certain American visitors must have begun to circulate in certain circles in New York. Cognoscenti (Am.: wise guys) such as the publisher of *Esquire* magazine would arrive on a visit, hugely enjoying the pleasures of the flesh that were easily available to them in this downtrodden and beggar-poor country. There was something obscene in this, especially when they later described their visits in the style that was typical of *Esquire* at the time and that, alas, has become typical of most American magazines since then: the kind of prose whose principal purpose is to tell what kind of shoes, what kind of cheese, what kind of people, and what kind of sexual compositions are "in"—a concept of connoisseurship that is public, not private. For what is the use of the discovery of a superb little wine from an unknown vineyard, or of a superb ruined city where formerly aristocratic privileges and pleasures can be secured for peanuts, unless the fact, even more than the subject, of one's discovery can be displayed in public?

The other kind of unpleasant visitor was the sort of émigré who, having left Hungary before the war and being well on the way to a lucrative or spectacular career in the United States, usually in the capacity of either a scientist or a moviemaker, would arrive in Budapest from a Paramount Studio or from a Rockefeller University, full of arrogance, unease, and contempt for the miserable and despondent people of the country. I particularly remember one of these tatty birds of passage, already beyond the prime of his life, decked out in the regalia of an American colonel or brigadier, shuffling his flat feet across the lobby of the American mission building. I read about him a few days later: He was professing the right kind of leftward opinions of the time. His sour countenance seemed to reflect his opinions: Hungary got what she had coming to her, that is, the Soviet occupation, the best thing for a people who had been stupid enough to be allied to the Germans. Years later in the United States he became a scientific adviser to the Eisenhower administration, one of the scientist-spokesmen for the production of bigger and better hydrogen bombs. In an interview he gave in the '50s I read: "I know what communism means: I know what the Soviets did to my unhappy country."

The British were a slightly different

story. There were fewer of them; they were diffident and also more aloof. Because of geography and tradition and because they were the standard-bearers of the struggle against the Third Reich from the outset, we thought, before Year Zero, that the British, rather than the Americans, would be the chief Western power in our part of Europe after the war—which, of course, did not turn out to be the case. They were far less impressed with the charms of Hungary and of Hungarians than were the Americans; they acted as if they knew that Hungary now belonged to the Soviet sphere of interest, and that there was not much left to do.

My first meeting with them was sad. I was plodding home on a late March evening when the suddenly warm and liquid air and the brightness of the twilight promise the pleasantness of summer for people in more or less normal conditions, while for others this development of implacable warmth and of light serves only to illuminate one's wretchedness and misery—March, and not April, being the cruelest month, at least in my native city. I knew that the arrival of the British and American missions was imminent. Suddenly, rounding a bend on the empty boulevard, I came upon two British officers, with red tabs, one of them carrying his cane, taking a brisk after-dinner walk, no doubt. I stopped. "Are you British?" I asked. "Oh, it is so good to see you"—or words to that effect. We exchanged a few words, and they went on. I was only 21 years old, but even then I felt that this encounter had the sad tinge of a long unrequited love. So they had come, after all—even if it was too late, after so many years of disappointments, after so many years of waiting, of hope, of tragedy. I sensed a kind of embarrassment as they went on. We, who loved the British in 1940—memories that even now give me a *frisson*—imagined their future victory: the triumph of a British-led Europe where freedom, decency, and a kind of easy elegance would exist anew. But it was not to be such a world.

At any rate (certainly at any rate of exchange) the British were poorer than the Americans. They were poorer than they had ever been, but as snobbish as ever. For the British, unlike for other peoples, snobbery is the outcome of diffidence as much as of arrogance, perhaps even more. They were unwilling to get involved with men and women whom they could not place and on whom, on occasion, they might have to depend. It was all restrained, modest, and cold with a slight touch of being almost shabby. It was all contrary to Hungarian expectations, though not to my own, having attended school in England for two years as a teenager.

Still Anglomania lived on. One of my pathetic memories of Year Zero includes a wedding reception in the fall. A Hungarian girl, the only daughter of an impoverished, gray-faced doctor, had fallen in love with a British sergeant, a North Englishman, with the long, knobby face of his class, which, as I instantly recognized even before he spoke, was that of the lower-middle variety. But this his bride, and her family, did not (or perhaps did not want to) know. I can still see her nervously smiling in the living room of that apartment (the reception was held at home), furnished with the remnants—German china, Bohemian glass, faded runners, grayed lace, a worn rug—of a destroyed bourgeois past that once had belonged to a world that was civic, fussy, stuffy, but, after all was said, reasonably honorable. Her luck, the fortune, to be married to an English soldier at this time, to be carried off as a bride to England! I, and perhaps some others, knew that there was something very wrong: that her progress from this broken-down boulevard apartment with its low-bourgeois bibelots to a gas firegrate somewhere in the Mid-

lands was not necessarily up. After all, for someone born in Hungary even the ubiquitous cooking smell of paprika and onions frying in cheap lard—especially ubiquitous now when it could no longer be confined to kitchens—was preferable to the coal-smoke and sultana-cake and weak-cocoa odor of mid-England; and even the broken remnants of a past, that grand piano whose chords had long lost their twang and whose polish had long lost its shine, and the doctor-father's *Collected Works of Goethe* in the glass bookcase, were symbols of matters that would not exist where this girl was about to go. This decent and good Englishman stood there uneasily and self-consciously cracking jokes with two of his pals; he was getting roped into something that was embarrassing and difficult. I doubted whether the marriage would last a year. Perhaps he did, too. The bride, well-tutored, articulate, Hungarian, did not know it. In a very Hungarian way, the wish *was* the thought, again and again.

In 1948, large factories were nationalized throughout Eastern Europe. Industrial production shot up, but, with the production of consumer goods throttled, the standard of living failed to rise.

I have now described the few hundred Americans and Englishmen who were temporary residents of my native city at the time. But how about the Russians, of whom there were hundreds of thousands around, who ruled my country and all of the surrounding countries then, and indeed, until just the day before yesterday?

The Russians? Well, there is not much to say about the Russians. They were everywhere and they were nowhere. All kinds of funny, and some not so funny, books have been written about them, about their childishness, their primitiveness, their brutality—about the Russian soldiers who tried to shave out of flush toilets, mistaking them for washbasins, or who gulped down entire bottles of eau de cologne, mistaking them for perfumed vodka.

During the 18 months that I spent under Russian occupation I did not meet a single Russian who spoke an intelligible French or English or even German. They all seemed to have been stamped out of a mold: their minds even more than their bodies. Under Soviet rule the eternally passive masses of the Russias had been activated—up to a certain level, in certain ways. They were taught to read and write; they were taught to think in public categories, for the first time in their history. They had acquired a new skill: They had learned words and phrases that were public answers to public questions. They were more than satisfied with this achievement: a verbal achievement that rendered them civic and "cultured."

What impressed me even at that time was the Russians' deep-seated sense of inferiority. They, the conquerors, seemed

quite stiff and uneasy at the receptions of the American mission. In spite of their elephantine and hideous power they would react to the slightest kind of criticism; they insisted that respect be paid to them on any and every occasion; all in all, they were very unsure of themselves, perhaps especially in the presence of Americans, for whom, I am sure, they had an emotional kind of admiration that they tried their best (and also their worst) to suppress. I was not at all surprised when, a few years later, Stalin began the ridiculous campaign proclaiming to the Soviet peoples and to the world that the inventors of the telephone, the airplane, etc., etc., had not been Americans or Europeans but Russians.

It was mainly because of the Russians that the distaste for communism in Hungary was so extraordinarily widespread. I thought then, and also much later in the United States—arguing with Americans about this in vain, until I was blue in the face—that communism was not much of a danger, that once the Russians removed themselves from a European country they occupied, communism and communists would vanish there. The very fact that something was propagated by the Russians made it repugnant. Other European peoples who had lived under Russian rule decades before, the Finns, Baltics, Poles, had had this experience. In this respect German rule, precisely because it was more civilized on the surface, probably would have harmed Hungary more in the long run, for then the culture of the nation would have become more than considerably Germanized. As matters turned out, after more than 45 years of Russian occupation, the Russian influence on the culture and civilization of my native country has been zero.

This brings me to the deficient appeal of communism and of communists. During Year Zero I could see who were the kinds of people who joined their Party. The brightest among them were the opportunists such as the earlier-mentioned J., or the capitalist friend of my family who chose to join the winning side because it was the winning side, *pur et simple*. (Among opportunists no less than among revolutionaries there is such a type as *un pur*: the person who will allow no compromise to sully his dedication to the supreme cause of opportunism.) Oddly—or perhaps not so oddly—the Russians, forever eager to be appreciated, especially by people who were smart, had a respect for such opportunists, much more than they had for the motley variety of convinced communists. What struck me at the time was how many of the latter were—how should I put it?—people with a deeply embedded sense of personal, rather than cultural, inferiority. To be sure, all of us suffer from the wounds of some kind of humiliation, all of us nurture at least one complex of relative inferiority in our hearts; but there are some people who allow these sentiments to grow to an extent that they became a dominant factor in their personalities and aspirations, and this seemed to be the case with most of the communists I met in 1945. They were unsure, suspicious, narrow, and bitter: in sum, preternaturally *aged*—as was indeed the philosophy of Marxism, that cast-iron piece left over from the junk heap of 19th-century ideas.

Sometime during the summer of Year Zero I met Georg Lukács,* one of the few famous communist intellectuals, who had just arrived from Moscow. He, too, had the appearance of a tired survivor from another age: a leftover from the Weimar period. Everything about him was drooping and sliding down: his glasses, his eyelids be-

*I am no relative of this man, with whose name mine has been sometimes confused. His international fame was resurrected—or rather, artificially inflated—by Anglo-American intellectuals circa 1960. Few people have bothered to read him in his native Hungary.

hind his glasses, his ears, his nose, his large cynical mouth, his coat, his cravat, his tobacco-stained hands. His countenance, curiously like that of many other Weimar intellectuals whom I would later encounter in America, reminded me of a dirty ashtray. He knew German better than he knew his native language, which he spoke with a weary coffee-house accent. His conversation, or what I remember of it, consisted mostly of tired *Kaffeehaus* witticisms with which he tried not only to lighten the customary Marxist platitudes but also to cover up the fact that he knew remarkably ("remarkably" being the *mot juste*) little of what Hungary had lived through and what Hungarians were thinking. His last contact with his native country had occurred more than a quarter of a century before, during Béla Kún's regime, which, for him, were halcyon days. In sum, an intellectual fossil.

Most of these still-believing communist intellectuals moved by inclinations that were Trotskyist rather than Stalinist. Of course they would go to any lengths to deny this. This is, too, why I was not at all surprised when, on Stalin's orders, a few years later the police government of Hungary began to get rid of some of them in the most cruel and brutal manner imaginable: No matter how cowardly and conformist, they were, after all, international communists, not dumb Muscovite minions; they were not particularly good at being both brutal and vulgar, unlike their Russian masters. This was also why I was not surprised that most of these surviving communist intellectuals were in the vanguard of the 1956 uprising, when they had finally realized that the rule imposed on them was so stupid and senseless as to be intolerable. They also realized that "intolerable" is what people no longer want to tolerate.

The year 1945 was already into autumn. In September Baron U., a great banker and capitalist, and a very genial man to boot, gave a party in his relatively untouched mansion, where he invited leading members of the government and of the political parties, including Rákosi, the potato-headed, unscrupulous boss of the Communist Party, back from Moscow. (I was not among the guests.) I asked F., the Baron's relative—an older man, another former great industrialist and an officer of the Hungarian-British Society—why U. would do such a thing. "You are too young to understand, my boy," F. said. "We were brought up by the principle"—he said it in English—"right or wrong, my country." I was impressed by his response; I could not answer him and thought about it for a long time, feeling, however, that there was something wrong with this. Many years later I read G. K. Chesterton with delight: "My country right or wrong is like saying, 'My mother, drunk or sober.'" Still, Chesterton's aphorism related to an England, swollen with pride, in the aftermath of the mafficking and the jingoism of the Boer War. We, in Hungary, another generation later, were stiff and swollen not with pride and possessions but with hunger and hatred, including self-hatred. I was struggling against the communist subjugation of my country, yet if someone had offered me American or Swiss or Portuguese citizenship I would have accepted it in an instant. "Right or wrong," I thought, "*my* country?" From this time on not much remains to be said: Year Zero was about to run out—and I was about to run away from my country.