

## Memory Tracks: state, nation and everyday life in 1970s Budapest

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### I. Introduction

What light can a Western anthropologist shed on the experience of everyday life in a country in which he or she typically stays for one or two years at most? Very often the specific focus of the project is a remote village in the mountains, entirely unlike the conditions which prevail elsewhere in the country. Merely by virtue of being a foreigner, the anthropologist's experience of everyday interaction is radically different from that of the indigenous scholar. The general criticisms originally levelled by Tamás Hofer in the 1960s (Hofer 2005) are relevant also in retrospective considerations of everyday life under socialism. How can the "slash and burn" approach of the short-stay visitor possibly produce results comparable in value to the studies of scholars who have spent their entire lives in one location and truly know a country from the inside? In this particular case, how can an outsider come along and offer some positive comments on the everyday life of the late socialist period in Hungary, without having experienced any of the hardship and dislocation that preceded this golden age?<sup>1</sup>

There is basically no answer to this and the implication is clear: anthropologists are well advised to stay at home! Hofer was prepared to grant the foreign anthropologist some credit when it came to the task of comparative analysis in the manner of the more rigorous sciences; but when it came to *understanding* a society, the "national ethnographer" was self-evidently in a superior position. My answer at the time was to argue that the foreigner need not give way to despair but could instead work out a division of labour with local scholars. Under socialism it was obviously easier for foreigners to document certain characteristics of social life than it was for the locals, who would have endangered themselves and colleagues if they had ventured into certain territory (Hann 1987). But this argument "for" the Western scholar does not get us very far. First, those countries which allowed foreign anthropologists to conduct fieldwork were also likely to be the most liberal in terms of what local scholars were free to publish. Secondly, when it comes to understandings of everyday life, it is not obvious why the accounts of an anthropologist should be taken more seriously than those of other foreigners – journalists, diplomats etc. Indeed, how is one to distinguish between the perspective of the anthropologist and the journalist? I recall that, during the giddy years of *Solidarity's* heyday in 1980–1, I was dissatisfied with Western newspaper coverage that often implied that every corner of Polish society was 100 per cent behind this movement. My experience of everyday life in a remote village at this time gave me quite different insights. Yet when, a few years later, the American anthropologist Janine Wedel published a book called *The Private Poland: an anthropologist's look at everyday life* (1986) I was again dissatisfied, this time because Wedel's

work "merely" detailed her experiences of everyday life and lacked a more precise focus as anthropology.

My own project in Hungary between 1975 and 1977 was a village study and, though focused on contemporary phenomena, did not prioritise "everyday life" as such. I have continued to visit both Budapest and my field site in Tázlár over the years, but I have not tried to keep up with the vast scholarly literature on the socialist era published since 1990. More than twenty-five years after my first fieldwork, I claim no privileged vantage point. Anthropologists' accounts of the socialist era may not add much to the accounts of local scholars, to all the work which has been done by researchers into oral history and by those who have delved into various pertinent archives. The foreigners may, however, sometimes provide an alternative point of view. The anthropologist who looks back on a short period of his/her life spent in an unfamiliar setting is bound to reconstruct the "socialist everyday" differently from those whose entire lives are played out in one country. He or she may be able to provide a corrective to accounts which emphasize the repressive aspects of socialism, a bias which is only to be expected in the early period of the new democracy, in which those previously unable to speak freely could now do so. The foreign anthropologist is no "observing angel", but may be better able to maintain a measure of political detachment, and to give voice to those actors of the *ancien régime* whose voices are seldom heard in post-socialist publications. At any rate that is the intention of this essay. Of course the reader may dismiss the recollections which follow as subjective and tendentious – just as I regard some other people's retrospective accounts as dubious and unrepresentative.

### II. Hungary in Context

I stayed a little longer than most anthropologists who ventured behind the "iron curtain" – altogether three years in Hungary between 1975 and 1980 and two in Poland 1978–81. For some time I was travelling regularly between the two and in a good position to compare them, since the different conditions had a crucial bearing on my own survival strategies. As a foreigner in Poland in 1980–1 it was often difficult to purchase food. I had only a tourist visa and no entitlement to ration coupons. Unlike Hungary, Poland had a system that required Western drivers to pay several times more for fuel than the drivers of vehicles registered in Poland and other Eastern bloc countries. I was able in the latter part of my stay in Poland to have my Soviet-made Žiguli (purchased second hand in Cambridge) re-registered in Budapest, which saved me considerable inconvenience with cans. But this bureaucratic operation did not dispense with the need to use personal contacts to maintain the vehicle in Polish conditions, e.g. to obtain

supplies of anti-freeze. In this respect my experiences as a foreigner in these years of crisis in Poland gave me first-hand experience of the sort of difficulties faced by virtually all citizens in everyday life, difficulties that are described graphically by Wedel.<sup>2</sup>

Poland's combination of economic chaos and political laxity (I was able to stay for almost two years by renewing a tourist visa, conditional only on the exchange of seven dollars per day into *zloty* at the official rate) was unique in the bloc. Of course every country had its distinctive features. The economy functioned better in the German Democratic Republic but it was out of the question that Westerners be allowed to conduct long-term fieldwork there.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, for a relatively short period in the 1970s Romania welcomed a unique concentration of American anthropologists, including Katherine Verdery and the Amherst group led by John W. Cole. All of these scholars undertook empirical research, several in remote parts of the countryside. The large body of work they published contains a rich store of information about the functioning of the Romanian socialist society of the time (for an introduction see the special issue of *Dialectical Anthropology* to which they contributed in 1976). It is worth noting that Verdery's major work in this period was a historical study (1983); she felt unable to write openly about many aspects of contemporary life. On the other hand, Steven Sampson (1984) and David Kideckel (1993) explicitly addressed those aspects of socialist life which were of crucial importance in the everyday lives of most citizens: problems of economic shortage, and the resultant dependencies on informal social networks and "corruption" (analogous to the terrain charted by Wedel in Poland).

Hungary was very different. The country which I discovered in the 1970s was, following the introduction of the "New Economic Mechanism" in 1968, already reaping the benefits of flexible policies which had decentralized decision-taking, opened up a lot of scope to the private sector, and strengthened incentives by allowing market principles to prevail – of course within carefully specified limits.<sup>4</sup> The shops were well stocked and prices (for a Western visitor) were low. Hardly surprising, then, that I have good memories of that first year in Budapest. My scholarship (2,800 forints per month, plus free accommodation) enabled me to live well. I was well aware of the ironies in being able to revel in one of Central Europe's finest bourgeois cities, while enjoying socialist subsidies in every domain, from concert tickets to the recently completed metro line. Certainly I could enjoy a higher standard of living than I had enjoyed as a student in the UK. Strong espresso coffee at two forints or less for a *dupla*, and a sweet fizzy grape juice called *Traubisoda* were among the first tangible delights for my taste buds. I also recall the brilliant posters advertising a product called *Fabulon*, a product I never bought, indeed I still do not know what it was; but the model on the poster was simply ravishing.

In short, this was not at all the grey, drab, shortage economy that most Westerners imagined to prevail in the COMECON bloc. I was of course aware that many aspects of life were far from paradisiacal. Right from the beginning, my friends included persons highly

unsympathetic to the socialist state. Virtually everyone was affected by restrictions on foreign travel which gave them a sense of confinement (*bezártság*) and made me realize how privileged I was in comparison. Yet I heard rather little criticism of the government leaders and their policies. By this time it seemed that most Hungarians saw no point in dreaming about a political upheaval, but had turned instead in profiting from the new economic opportunities opening up in all fields. (A comparison with post-1989 China is instructive.)

I made some effort to move in very different social circles during that first year, which was primarily devoted to learning the language (1975–6). I was able to maintain some of these contacts during the following year while living in the countryside, and to renew them in 1979–80, when I returned to Budapest to work for a year as a language editor at the *New Hungarian Quarterly* (since 1990 plain *Hungarian Quarterly*). I lived for most of that first year in downtown Pest, but over the years I also became acquainted with conditions in the pre-socialist tenements of Angyalföld, the new socialist housing estates of Old Buda, and the villa districts of the Buda hills. I visited the Academy of Sciences and the universities on a regular basis; but my social time was by no means taken up entirely with intellectual company, and I had virtually no contacts to the capital's small group of self-proclaimed dissidents.<sup>5</sup>

### III. Football with friends: idealistic alienation from the state?

So, what did I do in that first year? Given that my number one priority was to learn Hungarian, the obvious policy was to avoid places where communication was always likely to switch into English or some other Western language. Sport was a key element in this strategy for me. I should make it clear that my sporting prowess has never been better than mediocre. In my colleges in Oxford and Cambridge I had played soccer on lush English grass, and outside the football seasons I kept reasonably fit by running. I had no plans to engage in any organized sport in Hungary. I think I had the usual preconceptions about how Eastern Bloc states manipulated and exploited their sporting stars – stereotypes which have been partially confirmed since the demise of socialism, e.g. the proven cases of drug abuse in the German Democratic Republic.<sup>6</sup> What I had not realized was, first, how many ordinary citizens actively followed – almost obsessively – the top sports news internationally; and, second, how many participated in sport at all levels, often without any aspiration to compete. Football and running became two of the chief elements in my everyday life in Budapest (swimming was a third; my abilities are even more limited here and I shall not mention it further; besides, any tourist can visit the city's thermal baths and observe their significance for the local population).

I found my football team thanks to a secretary at the Anthropological Institute of the Academy of Sciences. She introduced me to a group of her friends, who had stayed in close touch after finishing *gimnázium* in

central Pest. Members referred to the group simply as the *társaság* (company). Its composition was diverse: most were students in their early twenties, i.e. my own age, and from intelligentsia families, though some had blue-collar jobs. The son of a well-known and politically controversial poet seemed to show little interest himself in pursuing an intellectual's career and always wanted me to bring him the latest Frank Zappa record when returning from the West. Some were Jewish, but that was never a subject of conversation. It was clear to me from the beginning that the *társaság* was unsympathetic to the socialist state; a few years earlier some individuals had participated in protest meetings on March 15. Nonetheless, the political issues of the day had little impact. My friends distanced themselves from their state in a different way from the new cohorts of socialist entrepreneurs: I would say that they despised it on moral grounds and they believed Western states to be superior in this respect (an idealistic view which I occasionally dared to question).

Above all, we had common interests in popular music and in sport. We did not support any of the big teams in Hungary and I cannot remember ever visiting a football stadium with the *társaság* for a "top game". Instead, we played ourselves – for hours on Sunday mornings on grass on the Margaret Island, and mid-week in a five-a-side league at the Árpád Bridge sports complex. The latter was soccer played on cinders in a cage only a little larger than a tennis court – it was really a quite different sport from what I had played in England. The games were short and fast. We were rather average and my performances in mid-field were somewhere below the average, but the team spirit was marvellous. I spent a lot of time in the company of these friends, including weekends in the Börzsöny Hills and at Lake Balaton. The strength of the ties they had to each other was something I envied (I have never come across a secondary school cohort in Britain which held together in this way).

Of course my participation was initially limited due to my limited language skills. I certainly missed much of the humour. Moreover I did not have to worry about military service as they did, and everyone knew that my life trajectory would take me elsewhere. Yet these kids made the foreign kid feel at home and their kindness and consideration were often overwhelming. The main thing for me was that, almost from the beginning, I could be confident that they were not "performing" for the benefit of the foreigner (a constant problem in the work of Wedel). Members of the *társaság* certainly went out of their way sometimes to sound out my views on particular topics, or to convince me of their point of view on some matter, national or international. But many conversations and the parties I attended unfolded just as they would have in my absence, and I had no influence on lively discussions and the playing out of differences of opinion within the group.

Over the years I have lost touch with all but one member. The *társaság* gradually fragmented as its members married, made careers, and moved away. My memories have also fragmented. The fastest winger in the team had a distant relation in Belgium: I remem-

ber his sadness, after returning from his first visit to a Western country: "it seems that you in Western Europe also have a long way to go to solve your social problems", was the gist of his verdict. (I believe he went on to become a successful banker.) Our most effective striker over-stayed in Britain by a full year after his passport was confiscated by the Hungarian consulate. Friends felt sure that he would face few reprisals for this misdemeanour when he returned to Hungary, since his parents were communists of long standing, but in fact the recriminations were considerable.<sup>7</sup> As far as I know, no one else fell foul of the state in this way, not even those who became actively engaged in the opposition movement in the last decade of socialism.

#### IV. Orienteering: the supportive state?

Football, then, was very important in my early experiences of everyday life under socialism. Neither our Sunday kickabouts on Margaret Island nor our local league could qualify as clubs or formal associations in the sense of contemporary "civil society" theorists. Everything turned around friendship and loyalties between a core of individuals; the precise membership of the *társaság* changed from time to time as new friends were introduced.

Whereas this community might be described as a niche, fully separate from the institutions of the socialist state, my second sporting life differed insofar as it unfolded within the framework of a socialist institution and state policies to widen participation.<sup>8</sup> Like my recruitment to the football *társaság*, it began by chance soon after my arrival in 1975. I was initially allocated a room in a small flat in Zugló (14<sup>th</sup> District), a suburban zone where it was possible to jog in the streets. By following Lumumba Street I could reach an athletics complex where the gates were always open and a 400 metre track was at my disposal. My first visits passed without any communication. One day I was addressed by another runner, who quickly overcame his surprise on finding that I was a foreigner and barely able to talk to him. He told me that I was welcome and encouraged me to come along to regular training sessions. He was a local boy who had not studied beyond grade school. Everyone knew him as Öcsi, literally "younger brother", and very soon that is what I called him as well, even though he was in fact a few years my senior. He was a long-distance runner who specialised in orienteering, and both he and his wife were (unpaid) coaches for the Sports Association of the Postal Workers' Trades Union, to whom this sports complex belonged. I eventually became a full member of this Association (*Egyesület*).<sup>9</sup> Although I did not participate in competitive events (apart from one international marathon in Szeged in July 1977, best forgotten), the countless informal sessions both at the track and in the Buda hills were another important element in my education. Politics was even more completely off the agenda here. I only found out many years later that Öcsi's wife had family links to the upper echelons of the Communist Party.<sup>10</sup>

Orienteers combine physical fitness with enjoying nature and the mental challenge of map-reading at speed in more or less densely wooded countryside. At this time Hungary had in Sarolta Monspart one of the leading international stars in this sport. Her magnetism was one of the reasons for the popularity of the sport in the 1970s (I believe she later made a successful career in television). My friends at the Egyesület were not obsessed about winning; what mattered more to them was a) the opportunities which this sport opened up to visit foreign countries, and b) the opportunity to impress upon young people of all ages the importance of a healthy life-style and of nature conservation. The dedication of Öcsi and his wife Vera to the younger cohorts of their team impressed me deeply. He died tragically in 1992 of a heart attack. Vera still works in Zugló as a full-time employee of the sports department of the district authority. She competes internationally in the veteran category, and her values have not changed at all over the years: she believes in the broad dissemination of sport in the interests of a higher quality of life for the masses, not investment in a tiny sporting elite. Unfortunately she has found that it has become progressively harder to sustain these ideals in the post-socialist years. Through Öcsi and Vera I learned that the socialist encouragement of “sport for all” had positive consequences for the everyday lives of millions. The foreign anthropologist is not alone in looking back on this aspect of socialism with nostalgia.<sup>11</sup>

#### V. Popular music: the triumph of socialist cultural management?

Popular music was another vital field for me and for many of the people I met during that first year in Budapest.<sup>12</sup> The football *társaság*, I soon realised, was exceptional in its knowledge of Western popular music, but even within this field there was tremendous differentiation in Hungary by this time: the clientele of Suzy Quattro was quite different from the following of Pink Floyd and Emerson, Lake, and Palmer. Many Hungarian groups were established in the later 1960s; while some were more or less clearly modelled on an internationally celebrated Western band (the 1970s group Mini were, to my mind, musically every bit as impressive as Britain’s Jethro Tull), others developed their own distinctive style. It was not easy to buy Western music and these records were very expensive; but selected artists were distributed, e.g. I still possess an album of the greatest hits of Jimi Hendrix, imported to Hungary from India. Informal connections were extremely important in this sector: e.g. they helped me to gain access to a splendid Bob Dylan compilation, issued by Supraphon in Prague. Sometimes even locally produced records sold out very quickly, so that even in market-oriented Hungary it was essential to have good contacts in order to obtain the goods.

The 1970s was a golden age for popular music in Hungary. Many young people identified passionately with their favourite singers or band. The quality of groups such as Illés (which mutated into Fonográf), LGT

and Omega was high by any standards. There was also tremendous interest among young people in the subcultures of the West.<sup>13</sup> Many young Hungarians, however, were even more enthusiastic about music with a more distinctive Hungarian colouring. They bought records of folk music, especially music from the Magyar minority in Transylvania, and participated in the city’s emerging “Dancehouse” movement (see Striker 1987; Taylor 2004). I remember listening at a *társaság* party to the first record of the Sebő ensemble, which includes musical renditions of classical and modern Hungarian poetry as well as folk music. I tried not to disappoint my friends and pretended that I, too, could appreciate the emotional depth of the lyrics, but in fact of course my understanding of the poems was highly restricted.

Sometimes cosmopolitan pop and the growing vogue for celebrating Hungarian culture came together in intriguing ways. Zsuzsa Koncz, the country’s outstanding pop vocalist, with some help from the Fonográf musicians, produced a wonderful LP in 1975 which consisted entirely of musical adaptations of Hungarian poetry. Fortunately for the foreign student, the texts were printed on the sleeve. I particularly enjoyed the lines from the album’s title track, a poem by Attila József where Zsuzsa sings

“I drink milk and smoke my pipe,  
I take care of my good name”<sup>14</sup>

I needed the assistance of a personal network to obtain a copy of this record, which had sold out rapidly before my arrival. I never succeeded in obtaining a copy of a famous song by one of Koncz’s collaborators on this album, János Bródy. Based on a well known folk tune “If I were a rose” (*Ha én rózsá volnék*), Bródy’s final lines were as follows:

“If I were a flag  
I would never fly,  
I would get angry  
With every breath of wind.  
I would only be happy  
If they stiffened me,  
So I wouldn’t be the plaything  
Of every breath of wind.”<sup>15</sup>

This was considered provocative and the group was banned from performing it in public. Many people knew the song, of course, but such controversial incidents were unusual and the fuss soon died down. These musicians were able to continue making music unimpeded, and the music was good; few of their lyrics could possibly be given a political interpretation.<sup>16</sup>

Other artists did incorporate sharp social criticism into their music. Tamás Cseh was a socialist troubadour whose record of 1977 “Letter to my Sister” (in partnership with János Másik and the poet Géza Bereményi, who wrote most of the lyrics) was a sensation in its exposure of socialist everyday life, from seedy *presszó* bars to the crass pedagogy of the “World View Club” (*világnézeti klub*), with passing references to abortion committees and alcoholism, broken families and

bribery, and defection to the West. The minstrel spells out the limits of foreign travel for young Hungarians in a track called Cracow Train (*Krakkói vonat*):

“Like the old days, we have a train ticket to Cracow.  
We drink frothy Czech beer in the buffet car,  
Your GDR earrings are dazzling,  
Let’s exchange 65 zloty for (Czechoslovak) crowns ...  
The flame of my Austrian lighter flares up  
– we’re going to Cracow!  
I see the glow at the end of your *Plovdiv* cigarette.  
Lean over across the table, let me see your ring,  
The gleaning stone that I bought you the year before last in Dubrovnik;  
Ah, we had some good times!”<sup>17</sup>

This disc of 1977 was already playing with sentiments of nostalgia (similar ambiguities can be found in post-socialist nostalgia, but I am not sure that the music is as good). On the one hand the singer was bemoaning the lack of freedom to travel, the *bezártság* which was certainly felt by those I played football with. On the other hand he was inviting the listener to empathize with intensely felt, precious memories. No doubt different listeners received a different message. Can the authorization of a record such as this be explained in terms of a sophisticated policy of containment by György Aczél, the Political Committee member responsible for culture? Did such works have had a “safety-vent” function in the society? Later, in the 1980s, punk and other new elements also made their appearance in Hungary. In comparison to neighbouring countries, the popular music scene remained exceptionally lively and creative down to the end of socialism. It seems to me that the radicalism that was tolerated in this domain was perhaps fully as important as the expansion of economic freedoms in hindering the emergence of significant political radicalism.

## VII. Conclusion: State and Nation from Below

The memory tracks I have followed in this paper have taken me back to everyday life under socialism in two recreational spheres, both of which were important for many urban citizens, music and sport. The latter tends to be associated with elite competition and socialist regimes have deservedly acquired a negative reputation in this regard. In Western perceptions, “everyday life” under socialism tends to be associated with problems of economic shortage, not to mention political snooping. Hungary in the 1970s was by no means entirely free of problems, though the common stereotype of this state in this period tends, with good reason, to emphasize “rampant accumulation” in the framework of the reformed socialist economy. In this paper, however, I have drawn attention to niches in which young people were able to relax and develop their own per-

sonalities, relatively free of the worries of material accumulation and of political pressures. When I put on my tracksuit to join the *társaság* for a football game or to rendezvous with Öcsi and his mates at the track, or for a run in the Buda hills, the only document I put in my pocket was my pass for the public transport (still in those days incredibly cheap and efficient), which bore a magyarized version of my name. This was the closest I ever came to throwing off my foreigner’s identity and realising the anthropologist’s dream of “going native”.

I suggest that these anecdotes and personal recollections of an outsider give insights which cast doubt on standard thinking about state and nation in the academic literature, both inside and outside Hungary. Notions that the socialist state was totalitarian are still widespread: but it does not seem to me that 1970s Hungary can possibly be described in such terms. Millions of citizens were able to get on with their lives without needing to take the kind of precautions that were needed by this time in the case of the GDR, with its bloated system of informants. Hungarians had much more scope for embourgeoisement and for keeping the state at a distance. Indeed the niches were so vast that I am inclined to see the diehard agents of the regime as occupying the real niche – repressive islands in a sea of great cultural as well as economic creativity. It stretches credibility to maintain that György Aczél and his staff were in complete manipulative control of cultural production: rather, a creative tension was at work; this had a dynamic of its own, not reducible to the laws of a totalitarian state.

The misapprehensions concerning nation are perhaps less obvious, but here too the perceptions of the non-native may be a useful corrective. Some of my friends in the country today look back on socialism as an era in which the socialist authorities sought to repress pride in being Hungarian (*Magyarság*). I think this is a myth: certainly it is not how I saw matters. I have mentioned the Dancehouse movement and the music associated with it. This was encouraged by the authorities and linked, often explicitly, to the cause of the Hungarian minority in Transylvania. My boss when I worked at the *New Hungarian Quarterly* had close links to the highest levels of the Party and he never missed an opportunity to ridicule the latest policies of Ceaușescu’s regime. This was standard practice throughout the country, from Academy mathematicians whose weekend conversation was routinely shaped by the latest issue of the literary journal *És (Élet és Irodalom)*, to the *gimnázium* class whose members were always pleased when their teacher for “*Világnézetünk Alapjai*” (“The Bases of Our World View”) skipped the prescribed ideological indoctrination in order to pour scorn on the latest restrictive measures of the Romanian socialists affecting Hungarian visitors to Transylvania.

National emotions also came through strongly in the realm of sport. Even though Hungary was no longer a major force in the most important sport, namely football, there was pride in the success of athletes in fields as diverse as gymnastics, javelin throwing and water polo. The success of one outstanding individual, the Olympic champion pentathlete András Balczó, was

documented in a film by Ferenc Kósa that highlighted the religious foundations of his moral integrity; the film (*Küldetés*, "Mission") was critical of "the system" in elite sport and, by implication, in national politics as a whole.

In short, it seems to me that the seeds of the sentiments that proliferated in the public sphere of the 1990s were definitely sown under socialism. Towards the end they were already strongly present in the public sphere, e.g. when the Fonográf musicians wrote and performed a highly successful "rock opera" to celebrate the founder of the Hungarian state King Stephen (Hann 1990). Even those who did not identify closely with this celebration of the nation were, I think, inevitably pressed by the quality of cultural products in this period into a heightened awareness of their *Magyar* identity. This was the most fundamental asymmetry between me and all those I encountered. They knew all about the music that had meant something to me, with my British background. Indeed they often knew the Western artists better than I did. But I knew nothing of the Hungarian artists and of what riches there were to be discovered in every domain. I did not care for all the popular music of that era; but some of the songs of Tamás Cseh, Zsuzsa Koncz, Illés/Fonográf, LGT and even more commercial stars of that period can still move me. To that extent, at least, an ignorant and naïve outsider has become a nostalgic insider. More importantly, this music, including the radical realist songs of Cseh and Bereményi, with only tenuous affinity to traditional *Magyar* music, now figure in the modern Hungarian musical canon.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Although I rely almost entirely on my personal recollections in this paper, they have been prodded, and in a very few instances supplemented, by recent conversations with Ildikó Bellér and correspondence with Sándor Striker, to whom I express my warm thanks.

<sup>2</sup> In retrospect I must therefore give more credit to Wedel than I was willing to at the time. In later work she has probed the functioning of informal mechanisms in more academic analyses (1992, 1999); but her more personal account of 1986 remains a good read.

<sup>3</sup> Realistic accounts of everyday life were difficult enough for native *Volkskundler*, whose enthusiasm for the new approaches of *Alltagsgeschichte* was mainly deployed in historical studies (Mohrmann 2005).

<sup>4</sup> I first visited Hungary as a student tourist in 1972, travelling on an 'inter-rail' ticket. In 1974 I returned to take part in a Summer University in Economics, organized by the Karl Marx University of Economics; I extended my stay privately for some weeks and made my first visits to the countryside. In October 1975 I began my serious engagement as British Council Exchange Scholar (renewed for a second year, 1976–7).

<sup>5</sup> In this respect, one of my predecessors as a British Council Scholar had set a good precedent. I was told when I arrived that the sociologist Bill Lomax had apparently spent most of his time enjoying the capital's wine-bars. I think both British and Hungarian sides were taken by surprise when Lomax published the results of his painstaking researches into the role of the Worker Councils in the 1956 revolution (Lomax 1976).

<sup>6</sup> For a fascinating study of sports in the "moral order" of socialist China, written by an American anthropologist who was also a first class athlete in the US, see Brownell 1995.

<sup>7</sup> This friend was able to return to London in the late 1990s as his country's cultural attaché.

<sup>8</sup> See Földes, Kun, and Kutassi (1982) for a full history of sport and "body culture" (*testkultúra*) in Hungary from feudalism down to the socialist popularisation of mass sports (*a sport tömegesítése*).

<sup>9</sup> This Association was not recognized by sociologists such as Elemér Hankiss (1990) as a civil society organization because it was officially run by a trades union, in practice an arm of the state. Yet I met very few postal workers in the years I ran with these friends; their social backgrounds were extremely diverse.

<sup>10</sup> Politics did intrude in a very unpleasant way several years after this friendship began when Öcsi lost his job in the photographic laboratory of the Ministry of the Interior, apparently on account of his contacts with me. He was soon able to find another suitable job, but this incident troubled me greatly – indeed it still does trouble me. But I am nonetheless reluctant to draw far-reaching conclusions about the nature of the Hungarian regime. I believe that the same could well have happened with a Hungarian in Britain at this time; or with an Arab in either Hungary or Britain nowadays, in the age of global terrorism.

<sup>11</sup> Nowadays I am living in Halle in the former German Democratic Republic and occasionally hear or read similar wistful comments. Some GDR athletes paid a high price for that regime's pursuit of sporting excellence; but it seems to me that, here too, this is only one side of the coin. Today's public authorities often lack the funding to maintain the sporting facilities built in GDR times, and these served broader swathes of the population than participate in sport in most Western countries. In a local newspaper I read recently that the proportion of Halle children who do *not* learn to swim has risen substantially since 1990. There is widespread concern nationally with obesity among children, and it seems clear that in the former GDR this is due at least in part to a decline in the provision of healthy food through a school canteen and in sporting activity at school.

<sup>12</sup> Downtown Pest, where I lived for the first half of 1976, also had much to offer fans of classical music. About half way between my room and the central University buildings was the Soviet cultural centre, where it was possible to buy Melodija records at prices which were a fraction of Western prices – and the quality of the recordings left nothing to be desired. I still enjoy listening to Richter, the Oistrachs and Rostropovič playing Beethoven, Brahms, and other classical composers of the bourgeois tradition. A few hundred metres away in the other direction I had the choice of Supraphon records in the Czechoslovak cultural centre and the Eterna label in the centre of the German Democratic Republic. Of course Hungarian Qualiton records were available everywhere. In these years the label's prestige project was a complete edition of the music of Béla Bartók – a composer whose music is saturated with his Hungarian national identity, and who never showed the slightest sympathy for socialist programmes.

<sup>13</sup> The authorities could hardly control this, though they did seek to influence it, e.g. in authorizing a musical based on a work by Tibor Déry, "Imaginary Report on an American Pop Festival", in which this author, who was far from a dogmatic socialist, expressed criticisms of the emerging hippy subcultures. I never saw the musical, but the music is marvellous (songs by Anna Adamis, music by Gábor Presser and LGT) and I think the effect on Hungarian audiences was probably the opposite of that intended by the authorities, namely to enhance the attraction of the foreign subculture.

<sup>14</sup> "Tejet iszok és pipázok, Jóhíremre jól vigyázok" (from *Kertész Leszek*).

<sup>15</sup> "Ha én zászló volnék, Sohasem lobognék. Mindenféle szélnek haragosa volnék. Akkor lennék boldog, Ha kifeszítenének És nem lennék játéka Mindenféle szélnek."

<sup>16</sup> These guys are still popular today, long after the end of socialism. Politically they took up quite different positions, some linking up with the nationalist right.

<sup>17</sup> "Úgy mint régen újra Krakkóba szól a vonatjegyünk. Habzó cseh sört iszunk az étkezőkocsiban... NDK fülbevalód szórja fényeit. Váltunk át koronára 65 zlotyt... Osztrák öngyújtóm lángja fellobban, Krakkó felé megyünk. Látom... Plovdiv cigarettám végén fénylő paraszat... Nyúlj át az abrosz fölött, lássam gyűrűdet, azt a szemkápráztató követ. Tavalyelőtt Dubrovnikban vettem még neked. Lám csak, hát voltak nekünk élményeink."

It is surely no accident that Romania does not figure among the countries indicated here. Together with the Soviet Union, this was the neighbouring state to which it was very hard for Hungarians to forget any positive associations.