

Arthur Koestler: Hungarian Writer?*

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As long as the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party defines the parameters of what is, and what is not acceptable literature, Arthur Koestler's books will never be best sellers in Hungary.

Koestler was always out of step with the politics in the land of his birth, both in his youth as a Zionist, and later as a member of the Communist party. By the time he abandoned political questions in mid-life, Hungary was behind the Iron Curtain, and his anti-Communist reputation was hardly appropriate for encouraging a welcome reception in Hungary. Although his subsequent endeavors in attempting to bridge the gap between parapsychology, mysticism and science were less tainted with political sentiments, acceptance continued to elude him and his work in the land of his birth.

Irrespective of the frequency of the changes in the character of the regimes in Hungary during his lifetime, Koestler remained attached to his origins, and was very much a part of the Hungarian intellectual diaspora. I have argued elsewhere that his ties to both his Hungarian and Jewish roots were a continual psychological and intellectual stimulant.¹ His last major work, *The Thirteenth Tribe*, was his final attempt to resolve the Hungarian-Jewish dilemma. His solution was neither better nor more original than anyone else's of his generation, nor of subsequent generations, who even at this juncture, more than forty years after the Holocaust, are uncertain what it means to be both Jewish and Hungarian.²

In present day Hungary, writers, journalists and editors, perplexed by their country's relative freedom, still cannot quite bring themselves to openly accept the Koestler oeuvre, even though there is a limited and grudging acknowledgement of those portions of it, which do not conflict with Hungary's current ideological posture. This reluctant recognition was quite apparent when shortly after

Koestler's death, two memorial pieces appeared, one in *Valóság* written by Mihály Sükösd³ and the other in *Nagyvilág*, by Erzsébet Vezér.⁴

Sükösd writes in considerable detail on Koestler's life and work, and suggests that Koestler's lack of "identity" caused him to be available for messianic and utopian commitments, only to eventually shun these involvements and to "blindly hate" that which he had once revered.⁵ Although Sükösd does not deny Koestler's Hungarian origins, he does assert that Koestler cannot be included among Hungarian writers, since he never wrote anything in the Magyar language.⁶ Further, and more telling Sükösd argues that Koestler's life does not provide much of an example for Hungarians to emulate. Sükösd contends that Koestler's various attempts to solve his inner emptiness through ideological attachments are seen as having driven him, in the latter half of his life, to purely solipsistic concerns: death, suicide and parapsychology.⁷

In contrast Vezér's piece offers a more tempered view of Koestler and his Hungarian ties. She notes that even after many years away from Hungary he continued to define his mother tongue as Hungarian,⁸ and that he even remembered two lines of a patriotic poem that he had written as a child.⁹ He was also proud of the fact that during his visit to Western Turkestan, in the 1930's he felt quite at home, since this was the area from which the Hungarians originated, and he was only the second Hungarian after Rusztem Vámbéry to have visited there. Vezér also notes Koestler's attachment to Endre Ady and Attila József, and though his last visit to Hungary was during the 1930's, and Hungarian came slowly and at times awkwardly, he still wished to speak in Hungarian to other Hungarians.¹⁰

Rather than the empty shell which Sükösd portrays Koestler as being, Vezér describes Koestler as a paradigmatic figure of our age: the tragic symbol of the intellectual who has lost his beliefs.¹¹

A more substantial memorial for Koestler was published in Hungarian in 1985, but not in Hungary.¹² The editor of the memorial volume, Béla Hidegkúti, drew together several pieces originally published in English by George Orwell, György Mikes, T.R. Fyvel, and W.H. Thorpe. There are also sections written by György Faludy, and David Martin (an Australian writer of Hungarian background) both translated from English and an excerpt by Koestler from the *Invisible Writing*, much of which is devoted to his attempt to translate Attila József into English.

Hidegkúti in the preface notes that to this point nothing has been written in Hungarian about Koestler, and this book is an attempt to

present, in Koestler's native language, a brief introduction to what Koestler's life meant to those who knew him.

Given the fact of his eminence and his recent death, fragments of his work during his "acceptable" period, when he was a member of the German communist party, from 1931 to 1937, have recently appeared in some popular journals. Why this should be the case is no easy matter to explain. The convolutions of the reasoning behind such publication decisions go beyond the simple fact of recalling an illustrious career. Part of the motivation for this belated and cautious recognition may derive from the fact that although his books are not readily available, Koestler is well enough known for some samples of his work to appear. Another reason for publishing him now may be to contrast his early work with the recent publication of *Darkness at Noon*, which appeared in a Hungarian translation printed in Switzerland shortly before his death and which has been reprinted in a *samizdat* edition, in Hungary in 1985. It may be that the young and ill informed may not know much about his communist past, and by publishing work written during his communist period, Koestler as a subsequent critic of communism would be seen as a renegade and consequently his ideological critique discredited. Finally, publishing him may be a way for the official press to play a quasi-oppositional role in presenting Hungarian readers with the unstated premise in Koestler's transition from believer to opponent of communism. This posture is about the only one available to reproach the control exercised by the party, as any more direct criticism is prohibited.

The first piece to appear was in the February 1986 issue of *Új Tükör*.¹³ It was entitled "Spanyol testamentum" (Spanish Testament) and taken from the book by the same title, which was originally published in German.¹⁴ This brief excerpt is based on Koestler's Spanish Civil War experiences and describes the reaction of a prisoner to the random elimination of his fellow captives. In this situation where no one knew when it would be his turn to die, a paralysing fear gripped those awaiting their fate. They retreat into themselves in anticipation of their final moment. Interestingly enough, the book from which this piece was taken is the only one of his books that was reviewed in a Hungarian journal shortly after its original publication.¹⁵

In the foreword to the *Új Tükör* piece, a brief biographical note mentions that Koestler became one of the spokesmen of anti-communism. Reference is made to his other interests, for example that his favorite poet was Endre Ady, his best friend was Andor Németh, that he played chess with Frigyes Karinthy and that he

knew Attila József. Significantly the title of his major anti-communist work, *Darkness at Noon*, never intrudes. Although it is mentioned that his father was Hungarian, his mother Czech, and that he was born in Budapest, his name is given as Arthur Koestler which — considering the usual manner in which Hungarian names are written, with surname first — labels the author as a foreigner. However, since he established himself in the West as Arthur Koestler, the editors may have felt that because he did not write this piece in Hungarian it would be inappropriate to define him as Hungarian. More simply, it may have been that since he had made his reputation in the West he would be recognized easily enough by writing his name in the usual Western fashion.

The second piece entitled “Bizalmas küldetés” (Secret Mission) also appeared in 1986 in *Nagyvilág*¹⁶ in an issue devoted to reminiscences of the Spanish Civil War by well known Soviet, Spanish and Western writers including George Orwell.¹⁷ This article was excerpted from a German language edition of *The Invisible Writing*.¹⁸ The selection deals largely with events during the Spanish Civil War, when Koestler was asked to look through the papers and documents left behind in Madrid by right-wing politicians.

Prior to this the only other work of Koestler’s to appear in an official Hungarian journal is a translation of an obituary he wrote on the occasion of Attila József’s death, which originally appeared in German in *Das Neue Tagebuch*, on May 13, 1939, a left wing journal produced by émigrés in Paris between the years 1933 and 1944. This was recently translated into Hungarian and appeared in *Mozgó Világ*.¹⁹

During the 1930’s Koestler did write a play in German, *Bar du Soleil* (Twilight Bar) which was translated into Hungarian, by Andor Németh, but not produced in Hungary. In fact Koestler lost the manuscript, and later while in France re-wrote it. It was produced in Paris, but it only played a few performance.²⁰

During his lifetime, this lack of recognition from his native land troubled Koestler.²¹ While his Jewish origins presented him with continual problems which he felt compelled to confront, his Hungarian ties were, as for many of his generation, something which he took for granted. In the period during which he grew up in Budapest, conscious assimilation by Jews into the Hungarian mainstream was defined as the means by which to gain entry into the whole of European culture.

While it is unlikely that any changes will be made in the definition of Koestler as a Hungarian writer, there is now evidence available which indicates that Koestler did indeed write in Hungarian.²² Two

articles appeared in the July–August and October 1927 issues of *Múlt és Jövő*, a Jewish periodical which was published in Budapest from 1911 until February 1944. At the time these articles were published, Koestler was 22 years old and had been in Palestine for about a year. Not surprisingly both articles deal with Jewish themes for it was during this period that Koestler was committed to the Zionist cause.

It was precisely at this point that Koestler had reached an impasse in his Zionist commitment. During the winter of 1926–27 he had become involved with *The Nile and Palestine Gazette* which was financed by the German legation in Cairo.²³ This venture ended after the paper had published three issues, and Koestler felt his career had reached a dead end.²⁴ At this crucial juncture, the possibility arose of becoming the executive secretary of the Revisionist movement²⁵ in Berlin and he decided to go there by way of Budapest in the Spring of 1927, thereby enabling him to see his parents, whom he had not seen for about a year. He arrived home without sufficient funds to continue his journey. In order to obtain the necessary funds to pursue his undertaking, he went to the editor of the *Pester Lloyd* with five travel pieces on Palestine and Egypt, along with an article that his mother had managed to get published for him in the *Neue Freie Presse*. The editor, whom Koestler identifies as Mr. Vészi-Weiss, but who was known as József Vészi, was an elderly gentleman, who was impressed with the fact that such a young man had been published in the *Neue Freie Presse*. Vészi selected three of the articles, and paid Koestler on the spot. With this money, (half of which he gave to his father), Koestler set out for Berlin.²⁶

The job of executive secretary turned out to be somewhat less than its title suggested and after four months Koestler applied for and got a position with the Ullstein Press as their correspondent in Jerusalem.²⁷ But now, the problem of returning to Jerusalem presented itself, and as was his typical predicament, he had very little money, only enough to get to Vienna. Once in Vienna, the pursuit for funds continued and he managed to obtain a contract with the *Neue Freie Presse* for two articles a month on Palestine, but Koestler was too timid to ask for a salary advance to pay his fare back to Jerusalem. Seeing his plight his good friends managed to scrape up enough money to pay the fare to Budapest.

Once back in Budapest, he again went to the editor of the *Pester Lloyd* showing his new credentials. He was now met with derision by the editor, who rebuked him by saying “You are a big shot now, so what do you need me for?” Vészi told him to “Scram.”²⁸

Undoubtedly Vészi no longer saw in Koestler the neophyte journalist who needed help, but someone who, if he were as accomplished as he maintained he was, did not really need to publish in his paper.

It was during this brief interlude in Europe that Koestler's articles were published in *Múlt és Jövő*. The first article is entitled "Miért küzd a revizionizmus?" (For What Does Revisionism Struggle?).²⁹ It describes the problems in Palestine and the positions taken by the Revisionists in opposition to the Zionist leadership. Koestler was a follower of Jabotinsky and he discusses the proposed political and economic programs of the Revisionists to ensure a viable Jewish homeland.

There is an anomaly in the presentation of this short article. In the brief introduction to the piece, the editor, József Patai, notes that Koestler had visited him within the past few days; yet Koestler's name is written Arthur Koestler which would define the author as a non-Hungarian. At this point Koestler was a rank novice, and not the international personality he was later to become. This name ordering raises the question about whether Patai and Koestler actually met. If they had met it seems unlikely that they would have spoken in German and that they would have been unaware of the other's ability to speak Hungarian. As this first article was published in the July–August 1927 issue, it is possible that Koestler may have met with Patai during this brief period prior to his leaving for Berlin. However Koestler, in his autobiography, does not mention any meeting with Patai, but only with Vészi who, one could surmise, was well acquainted with Patai. Given this, one possible explanation for Koestler's name written as if he were a non-Hungarian is that the article was written in German, the language in which Koestler was obviously most comfortable, and was one of the articles not selected by Vészi who may well have passed it on to Patai. Vészi likely told Patai about Koestler's coming from Tel Aviv and his innocence and inexperience, and since this article deals with Revisionism, Vészi may well have felt that the *Pester Lloyd* was not the appropriate place to publish it. Once Patai received it, he translated it into Hungarian. He may then have met with Koestler and decided to write Koestler's name in the Western manner as an indication of the far reaching character of the editorial links which *Múlt és Jövő* enjoyed.³⁰ It is hard to imagine Koestler not mentioning his meeting with Patai. Certainly the possibility exists that he simply forgot, as this was quite a frantic period for him. They may also have met after Koestler returned to Budapest in the summer of 1927; that is after his Berlin sojourn.³¹ As the first article was only published in the July–August

1927 issue, and Koestler returned to Jerusalem in September, it is possible that they met during this second visit to Budapest, and that Patai accepted this first article in German in order to help Koestler get back to Jerusalem.

There is much less to speculate about in the second article. It is not a political report, although its political overtones are clear, but a short story entitled "Meta."³² Now the author's name is given in proper Hungarian fashion as Koestler Arthur, even though within the title of the piece, Tel-Aviv is mentioned as the origin of the author. Quite possibly after the acceptance of the first article, Koestler wrote the second one in Hungarian in a simpler vein, with its political intentions veiled in a story about the hazards of being young and Jewish in the Hungary of the late 1920's.

In the story a young boy, Wajsz, tearfully describes to his father a game which was played in school during recess. The game, Meta, is one in which each boy first picks a nationality. They then gather around a ball. Someone calls out the name of a nationality and the one called has to grab the ball and try to hit one of the others with it. If a boy is hit five times, he is out and the game is over. Now as Wajsz is near the end of the alphabet, all of the other boys choose their nationalities before he does. Given this, Wajsz chooses to be Jewish. The other boys quickly gang up on him and he is hit by the ball five times and the game is quickly over. The teacher then tells him, that since he lost, he can now be the first to choose a nationality in the next game. In something of a pique he again chooses to be Jewish and the second round of the game begins. This time, however, someone else's nationality is called and he, Wajsz, throws the ball hard enough to cause the boy to fall, while he, Wajsz falls against a wall.

In describing this to his father, Wajsz says that as a consequence of the other boy's falling, the teacher gave him a demerit for his poor conduct. He tries to dismiss this punishment by saying that it does not really matter, as he will emigrate eventually to Palestine. His father quite upset at the boy's attitude, tells him to stop that kind of talk.

The boy continues by saying that in the next class, religious instruction, the teacher told his class that the mission of the Jews is to suffer until such time as the Messiah comes, because that is God's will. Wajsz then asked his religion teacher if it was part of God's plan for the Jews to be singled out in the Meta game, and if attempts to strike back should be punished by a demerit from the teacher. The religion teacher avoided the question and said that if he was given a demerit he probably deserved it. Wajsz then tells his father that he

will no longer allow himself to be bullied and that he is now a man. He fully intends to go to Palestine where he will obtain a sling shot and, like King David, will slay all those who try to take advantage of him.

This simple story is an explication for Revisionism as well as a critique of Jewish life in Hungary. The uncompromising posture of the boy is a means of justifying the “tough” image fostered by Revisionism, while the choice of Jew as nationality is intrusive, as Hungarian Jews made a constant point at this time of arguing that they were not a nationality, but only a religion. The whole point of the story is a reaffirmation of Koestler’s own ideological commitments at the time.

These two articles are probably the only ones Koestler ever had published in Hungarian during his lifetime. Now that he had obtained both the contract with the *Neue Freie Presse* and the Ullstein position, the German audience was obviously far larger than he could have reached by writing in Hungarian.

Neither article is likely to influence anyone about Koestler being included among the ranks of the great Hungarian literary giants. In fact he well knew that much of what he wrote as a young man was quite forgettable.³³ However, with the inclusion of this material into the Koestler oeuvre, there is clear evidence of his brief Hungarian literary career.

Koestler frequently admitted that his early publications were often written under the duress of survival and that he lost track of them. Surely these articles pale in comparison to his later work, but it is certain that he would welcome their rediscovery.

Notes

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1. Robert Blumstock, “Going Home: Arthur Koestler’s Thirteenth Tribe,” *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (1986), pp. 93–104.

2. *Medvetánc*, No. 2–3. This publication was sponsored by The Young Communist League’s Social Science Committee at Loránd Eötvös University in Budapest. About half of this issue is devoted to papers dealing with Jewish themes. See especially, “Hogyan jöttem rá, hogy zsidó vagyok,” [How I Came to Know That I am Jewish] by F. Erős, A. Kovács, and K. Lévai, pp. 129–144.

3. Mihály Sükösd, “Sors és sorstalanság: Arthur Koestler,” [Destiny and Lack of Destiny: Arthur Koestler] *Valóság*, December 1983, pp. 109–119.

4. Erzsébet Vezér, “Az ismeretlenbe kilőtt nyíl nyomában: Arthur Koestler útja” [In the Track of Arrow in the Blue; Arthur Koestler’s Road]. *Nagyvilág*, August 1984, pp. 1228–1241.

5. Sükösd, p. 116.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 116–117.
8. Vezér, p. 1239. It should be noted that Koestler probably did not mean this literally since his mother hated living in Hungary, and she never learned to speak the language properly. See *Arrow in the Blue* (London, 1952), p. 27.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 1240.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 1239.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 1241.
12. *Koestler Emlékkönyv* [Koestler Memorial Volume] (Chicago, 1985) edited by Béla Hidegkúti.
13. *Új Tükör*, Vol. 23, No. 6, February 9, 1986, pp. 18–19.
14. Arthur Koestler, *Menschenopfer unerböhrt...* (Paris, 1937). This book first appeared in French, with the title *L'Espagne ensanglantée*. When it was published in English its title was *Dialogue with Death*.
15. *Századunk*, Vol. 12, No. 6–7, p. 216, 1937. Although the Horthy regime was virulently anti-communist, it was possible for Koestler's work to be reviewed in Hungary, if not published at that time.
16. *Nagyvilág*, July, 1986, No. 7, pp. 1017–1019.
17. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* has also appeared in Hungarian, as *Állati gazdaság*, Chicago, 1985. It is available in Hungary as a *samizdat* publication issued by the AB Független Kiadó in 1985.
18. *The Invisible Writing* (Boston, 1954), Chapter 23, "In Dubious Battle," pp. 323–335.
19. Arthur Koestler, "Egy halott Budapesten" [A Corpse in Budapest], *Mozgó Világ*, June 1983, No. 6, pp. 62–64. This short obituary is placed in context by Erzsébet Vezér in "Véletlen találkozások József Attilával," [Chance encounters with Attila József], *Ibid.*, pp. 60–62.
20. Iain Hamilton, *Koestler* (New York, 1982), pp. 115–118.
21. George Mikes, *Arthur Koestler* (London, 1983), pp. 12–13.
22. In the latest edition of *Világirodalmi Lexikon* (Budapest, 1979), p. 392, it is suggested that Koestler may have written a piece in Hungarian entitled "A század párbaja" [The Duel of the Century] for the London-based Hungarian language journal, *Irodalmi Ujság*, October 13, 1957, since no translator is noted.
23. *Arrow in the Blue*, p. 155.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 156.
25. "Revisionism is associated with Vladimir (Zev) Jabotinsky (1880–1940). Its main principles were the emphasis on the establishment in Palestine of a Jewish state on both banks of the Jordan, its sharp opposition to what Jabotinsky regarded as Chaim Weizmann's policy of appeasement vis-a-vis the British and the Arabs, its hostility to socialism as a 'foreign creed' within the Jewish national movement, and its belief in the efficacy of military means to win Palestine for the Jewish nation." Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars* (Bloomington, 1983), p. 76.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 156–157. For more information on József Vészi, see *Zsidó Lexikon*, ed. Péter Ujvári (Budapest 1929), p. 948. Vészi was a prominent figure in the Budapest Jewish Community, but he may well be best remembered for the fact that his daughter Margit, was the first wife of the playwright Ferenc Molnár.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 162–163.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 164–165.
29. Arthur Koestler, "Miért küzd a Revizionizmus" *Múlt és Jövő*, July–August 1927, pp. 262–264.
30. *Múlt és Jövő* was an important educational forum for Hungary's Jews about Palestine and Zionism. However, Zionism had clear political implications, which were avoided by defining the role of *Múlt és Jövő* as educational and cultural, and not political. Patai had wide contacts with other Jewish publications and the cover of the journal indicates that *Múlt és Jövő* had correspondents in Berlin, Prague and Vienna.

See Oral History Interview with Professor Raphael Patai, February 20, 1980, *Columbia University Oral History Project*, pp. 3, 21.

31. *Arrow in the Blue*, pp. 164–165.

32. Arthur Koestler, “Meta,” *Múlt és Jövő*, October 1927, pp. 339–340.

33. *Arrow in the Blue*, p. 172.