

ABOUT THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE EMIGRÉ

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I

About the title of my talk: I am a historian, not a psychologist. (But every historian worth his name *is* a walking psychologist.) Nor am I a sociologist; but the psychology of the emigré has interested me for a long time, not the least because of my own experiences.

To begin with: we must distinguish between the exile; the refugee; the expellee; the emigrant; the immigrant; the emigré. Many of these — necessarily often inexact — categories of people have punctuated the often tragic history of our native country. *Kivándorló. Bevándorló. Menekült. Kitelepített. Száműzött. Disszidens.* (This last a relatively recent coinage, beginning in 1941, and then resumed around 1947.) *Emigráns.* Keep in mind that no exact translation will do, given not only the different histories of different nations, but some of the differences inherent in English and in Hungarian usage. “Emigrant” and “exile”, for example often overlap, even though they are not the same, as is the case with “száműzött” and “emigráns”. Ovid or Mikes might fit in the latter category; yet consider how, in Hungarian, there is a greater difference between these two than in English. No leakproof definition will do; as Dr. Samuel Johnson once said: “definitions are tricks for pedants”.

We are concerned, here with the psychic experiences of individuals. Yet my subject is something that is relatively new: the emigration of large numbers, of entire classes of people. There *were* precedents of this in the past, though not many. There was the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and Portugal in the 15th and 16th centuries; that was gradual. There was the emigration of the Huguenots and other Protestants from France in the 17th century, particularly after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. Most of them fled to Holland and England and Prussia (a few to Eastern America) where they became wonderfully assimilated and successful, because of their intellectual and mercantile talents. From 1791 to about 1795 came a relatively new phenomenon, the emigration of an entire social class: the aristocracy of France. This amounted to one per cent of an entire population; but after 1796 the majority of them returned, trickling back to France.

The first historian who wrote about some of the psychological conditions of such a class of emigrés was Alexis de Tocqueville, in the unfinished and for long unpublished portion of his history of the French Revolution. Following Tocqueville, Hyppolite Taine touched on the subject briefly. I cannot refrain here from mentioning, too, the

fine writer Rivarol, an emigré himself; his brilliant repartee when, in 1793, in a company of emigrés in a modest boarding house in Hamburg he heard a presumptuous man say: "nous aristocrates..."; "We aristocrats..." Thereupon Rivarol shot back: "C'est un usage du pluriel que je trouve bien singulier"; "This is a usage of the plural that I find indeed singular". Here Rivarol recognized instantly an example of a syndrome that is, alas, common in the psychology of many emigrés: their inflation or their exaggeration or often their outright falsification of their former social status. My generation of Hungarians know this syndrome, especially perhaps among the 1944–45 refugees: the "ezerholdasok", about whom some German or Austrian said that Hungary must have been a very large country indeed, since so many Hungarians had owned one thousand "acker" each...

Without summing up the history of Hungarian emigrés through the centuries, allow me to say something, first — for the purpose of an interesting comparison — about the phenomenon of the first large-scale emigration in recent centuries, that of 1849. Its exact extent and its precise numbers I cannot now reconstruct, except what we all know, that this was a fairly large exodus. It *did* have many similarities to later waves of such emigration, that I shall list in a moment; but there *is* an essential difference. Beginning about 1860, and surely after 1867, most of these emigrés returned to Hungary (indeed, many of them immediately took up positions in the Hungarian administration and political system after the Compromise of '67). Here comes the remarkable difference. Unlike around 1867, there are very few Hungarians who choose to return to Hungary permanently now — in spite of the drastic turn in the political fortunes of the country. This includes all of the successive waves after 1944. The vast majority of them do return, for a series of visits, seldom stretching for over a month. This phenomenon is entirely new. It is to a great extent a result of modern airline transport; but there are deeper and more complex factors involved in it. It amounts to a new kind of pendular commuting, pendular associations, pendular loyalties — *egy újfajta szellemi és egyéni ingázás* — the extent and the meaning and the psychic conditions and consequences of which are yet to be seriously described or studied by future social historians. It began around 1970, that is, nearly two decades before the recent radical turning-point in Hungary's history — and it has many, often superficial but nonetheless remarkable, varied manifestations, involving different people with different inclinations.

In any event, what is clearly discernible is the existence of five, perhaps, six waves of Hungarian emigrés during this century. Again it is difficult, and often impossible, to define them separately from Hungarian emigrants, that is, *kivándorlók*; there are many instances where the motives *and* the purposes of the emigré and the *kivándorló* were the same. Nevertheless, here they are: (1) the men and women who fled Hungary in 1919, predominantly because of their association the radical or Communist regimes of 1918–1919; (2) a numerically small but often significant number of people who left Hungary in view of the coming Nazi era (in 1939–41); (3) the men and women and their families of the winter of 1944–45, composed mostly (though not exclusively) of people associated with the nationalist or National Socialist order (a portion of them re-

turning to Hungary in 1945–47; (4) the men and women fleeing the gradual Communization of Hungary in 1947–49 (mostly members and leaders of the democratic parties and remnants of the upper bourgeoisie); (5) the large wave of those who fled in November–December 1956, after the Russian suppression of the national uprising; (6) a gradual and unceasing trickle of emigrés (often called “dissidents” by the regime) since about 1963.¹

The social and ethnic and political and religious composition of these groups was often different; but what they have had in common is that most of them belonged to the middle and upper classes; and that — with all of the previously mentioned inexactitude of precise categories in mind — they have been emigrés, rather than exiles or refugees or expellees or emigrants.

II

I am coming now to the main theme, which is that of the evolving psychic and mental conditions of the emigré. To the best of my knowledge, including my observations of men and women, and including my own experiences, this evolution usually follows three stages.

In the first phase the emigré hopes and wishes that, once essential political changes in his homeland are over, he could and would return. Let me add here that in this respect there is no fundamental change (though there are subtle, and more than subtle, differences) between the inclinations of emigrés, refugees, emigrants, or immigrants. Few people, including American historians, are aware that except for certain nationalities (Eastern European Jews and Irish) *most* immigrants to the United States in the very period of mass immigration came to the United States with this purpose in mind; and that during the seventy years from 1870 to 1940 as many as 35 per cent of immigrants to the United States *did* return to their homelands. (To this we must add that a large portion of these returnees then changed their minds and chose to sail back to the United States again.) Beyond this, it is rather obvious that the desire to return to their native country is the *principal* inclination of people who were involved in the politics of the country before their departure. We are speaking, in this case, of political (and often intellectual) rather than economic, religious, racial, etc. motives and purposes. I insist again that these motives and purposes often overlap (whence the imprecision of categorical definitions); but, to put this in other words; the political refugee is, in almost every case, an emigré. When it comes to such people, it is not only their memories, but their very thinking, the concentration of their mental interests, which is focused on recent and contemporary events and developments in their native country.

The second phase follows sooner or later. It is that of their relative Americanization. This is not the place to describe that development in any detail. It is a complicated process. It has much to do with their existential situation, their profession, perhaps with a marriage or a remarriage; it is conditioned by their relative success and by their relative material prosperity in the United States; and it is strongly reflected (as

well as, in more subtle ways, caused) by their increasing knowledge and use of the American language. In some cases an actual self-identifications with their Americanness (and I do not mean only their acquisition of United States citizenship) occurs. In a few cases this happens together with their gradual abandonment of their Hungarian roots and interests. What we have to keep in mind is that — notwithstanding the self-assertion of the person — this Americanization is *never* complete. (This has something to do, too, with the, by no means simple, phenomenon of “Americanization” different as that is from the similar phenomenon occurring in other nations; to this I must, albeit very briefly, once more return.)

The third phase comes later, again; and this is a kind of rediscovery of their Hungarianness. There are many complex reasons for this, partly unconscious (for example, the inclination of advancing age whereby earlier memories are sharper and stronger, than more recent ones); more important, on the conscious level, is the condition that the rediscovery of a certain pride in their native nationality usually happens at a time when the emigré had come to feel that his “Americanness” is sufficiently secure.²

Now what is remarkable is that this — frequent, and observable — development within the life of the individual merely repeats the larger development among immigrants as well as emigrés, lasting through three generations. *That* is a relatively well-known American phenomenon, whereby the *second* generation (of immigrants more than of emigrés) wishes to distance themselves from their parents, since they (the second generation) are indifferent or, at worst, ashamed of their foreign parentage. It is, then, the third generation, the children of the immigrants’ children, who take pride in their ethnic provenance and who rediscover (alas, often sentimentally and inadequately) the cultural and national assets of their now faraway national origins. However; this three-phase development is more common among immigrants than among emigrés; and, unlike some other phenomena, it is a common experience among all American immigrant families, not only Central, Southern or Eastern European ones.³

III

All of this suggests that the psychology of the emigré contains a very strong and enduring element of split-mindedness, in which the strongest, deepest but also most obvious factor is his use (or sometimes misuse) of two languages. That split-mindedness (at times amounting to a certain extent of self-deception) is latent in the maxim of Horace: “*Patriae exsul se quoque fugit*” — the exile (or emigré) from the homeland flees himself — yet the factor of two languages was not one that Horace could observe or describe.⁴

One would think that this split-mindedness affects professional intellectuals among the emigrés least of all, once they are ensconced in safe and respectable position within the American academic world (or in other intellectual occupations). This is rarely so, mostly because the majority of emigré intellectuals are, after all, involved as interpreters of their native culture of Americans. They are teaching or writing about Hun-

gary — or about matters and places closely connected with Hungary; or doing their professional or creative work rooted in standards and practices that they had acquired in Hungary — to Americans, in American English. In sum, their mental tendencies are split between their knowledge and its expressions; and between the sources of their knowledge and the requirements of American professional status. When they know English well, their situation may be alleviated; but their split-mindedness does not disappear. (The contrary example is true, too: those who gradually forget some of their native language are usually the same people who do not know English well enough either; but that phenomenon mostly affects poorer and less educated people, and immigrants rather than emigrés.)

A frequent and often lamentable example of such split-mindedness occurs among emigré politicians of all kinds, who do not only continue to see everything in the light of their vivid and enduring memories of political situation and tendencies of their native country shortly before their departure, but who interpret everything in American politics according to their Hungarian political understanding. (The first of these two phenomena was acutely summed up by Toqueville about 135 years ago.) Very few emigré politicians grow beyond this self-imposed and restricted perspective, to the extent that they acquire a mature and judicious understanding of the political (and social) realities of the new country and of an evolving world, though not at the expense of their understanding of their native country and *its* evolving situation. (One of the very few such examples was the Hungarian peasant genius Imre Kovács, a politician and writer whose premature death in 1980 at age 66 is an *enduring* loss to Hungary; what an important role he could have assumed in the present situation!)

Nearing the end of this paper I must direct attention to another related, though almost never observed, phenomenon, particular to the United States. This is that there is a subtle difference between “Americanization” on the one hand and between, on the other, the “Anglicization” or the “Germanization”, etc. of non-native people. In many ways “Americanization” is easier (of course I am not referring to mere acquisition of citizenship) than other assimilations; but in other ways it is more difficult and complex — mostly because of the overwhelming existence of the mass democratic society of the United States, including the popular usages, expressions and pronunciations of the American language. (Even for an emigré of great linguistic and cultural talents it becomes easier to learn near-perfect English or near-perfect French than near-perfect American.) One illustration of this may be the curious fact that most of the Hungarian emigrés of 1956 had an easier task in establishing themselves more or less successfully in the United States than the 1947–49 emigrés — in spite of the fact that levels of the cultural and social education of the latter were, generally speaking, higher than those of the former. Of course the American sympathy and generosity extended to the 1956 emigrés played a part in this; but — at least so I believe — only a part.⁵

Let me conclude, perhaps, with an example of emigré intellectuals on a high level. Let me contrast two famous figures: Joseph Conrad and Arthur Koestler. The first became one of the greatest English prose writers (even though he talked in a much accented English); he wrote Polish seldom, but identified himself with Poland throughout

his entire life. The second spoke and wrote English very well and he spoke Hungarian, too, perfectly; yet he chose not to write anything in the Hungarian language (and almost nothing about Hungary) after the 20th or 25th year of his life. He is the kind of intellectual emigré whose success in his finally adopted country grows parallel to the abandonment of his interests in his native one. I think that I am — in sentiment and in aspirations — much closer to Conrad than to Koestler; but allow me to end with a confession about myself. I think that I am (or, perhaps, was) a somewhat unusual case among emigrés, for one principal reason. When I fled Hungary in 1946, I was convinced that a long-lasting night was falling on my native country. I convinced myself that I must make my career as an English-speaking and English-writing historian, not as an emigré historian who interprets his native country (or that part of Europe) in English. This conviction was strengthened by the fact that I happened to know English well; and also by a great Hungarian mind, a university professor of mine, who told me that I should avoid getting involved in emigré affairs in the United States. (“You can do more for your native land” he said.) Well, this may be irrelevant to my subject; what remains relevant, however, is the fact that, yes, I have come through the years to think more and more in English; I dream mostly, if not always, in English; I count in English; I write easier in English than in Hungarian; and I also claim to have a fair critical knowledge and insight of English prose. *But: this is not true of poetry.* Magyar poetry, even modern and abstract poetry, is closer to me, and will remain closer to me than most of the poetry written in the English language. *I understand it at an instant; and deeper.* Perhaps, as George Orwell once wrote, poetry is something like a family story, or a family joke. So I, too, am a living and walking example of the split-mindedness of an emigré, to which I shall add only one last, though important note. A split mind does not amount to schizophrenia, that is, to a split consciousness.

I only hope that what I said does not resemble the speech of a Member of the House of Commons about 200 years ago, about whom Richard Sheridan remarked that he said much that was both new and true; but unfortunately what was new was not true, and what was true was not new...

Notes

1. I am leaving aside the expelled Swabians, or German-Hungarian, of 1946–47 (as well as the deportees to the death camps of 1944); they were expellees (or deportees) and not emigrés, with this difference: the former chose not to return to Hungary, indeed, they became well integrated within the prosperous society of postwar West Germany; of the latter relatively few survived to return.
2. This is a definite example of the similarities and the differences between emigrés and emigrants (*kivándorlók*). The discrimination and occasional mistreatment of the latter, mostly poorer people, by native Americans, especially in the 1870–1925 period, was such that a considerable number of the emigrants did *not* arrive at the above-mentioned third stage. They — and especially their children — often chose to under-emphasize and, in some cases, even obscure their native origins, with which they felt uncomfortable, sometimes during their entire lives in the United States.
3. There is yet one last, fascinating phenomenon that I must say a word about. It is a phenomenon that seems to have affected mostly (if not exclusively) those of the 1947–49 emigré generation (including myself). It

is a phenomenon on the unconscious level (a word that I prefer to "subconscious"). It is a phenomenon of a common, and recurring, dream. The dream almost always takes the following form: the emigré has returned to his native city in Hungary, for a temporary visit; it was wrong and irresponsible for him to do so; he notices this on the faces of his friends and relatives who are anxious about him; he feels afraid and guilty himself, because he *knows* that he will *not* be able to leave again, that he will soon be arrested. It is amazing how many men and women of this generation have had this same dream, despite the fact that their fleeing Hungary took place in different ways and in different situations. Within the first five years of emigration this dream occurs fairly often; after that perhaps monthly, or several times each year; after about twenty years it no longer recurs. (It corresponds, perhaps, too, to the later experience of every emigré when he returns to Hungary: the joy of his arrival, and yet the deep sense of relief when his plane rises in the air or when from the window of a train or the windshield of a car he passes the first Austrian frontier marker.) I think it is a pity that no serious Hungarian psychologist has recorded or studied this extraordinary recurrence of dreams among a certain group of emigrés: a collective experience of a collective trauma where it is evidently the conscious that acts upon the unconscious, rather than the reverse (and in this way, contrary, too, to all of the accepted Freudian causalities).

4. Few emigrés, no matter how Americanized, and no matter how remote their lives and careers are from other Hungarians, arrive at a stage where they (1) dream, (2) count in English.
5. Another remarkable phenomenon, referring to a matter I mentioned in the early portion of this paper: traveling back and forth ("ingázás"). Despite their terrible experiences with the terror of the regime, many of the 1956 emigrés began to travel back and forth from Hungary *earlier* than most of the 1947-49 ones.