

## **Retrospect**

## A SOMEWHAT SLANTED VIEW OF INTERWAR BUDAPEST

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The editor of this volume asked me to write about Budapest before World War II because I was old enough to remember at least the last years. Obviously, what follows is not a scholarly paper. It is not even truly appropriate because the last years of the activity of the exhibited artists were the 1920s and my remarks will refer, as they did at our conference, to the 1930s. The Budapest which will emerge will not be the one some other people of my age remember. Not only do years dull memories, not only is each individuals' experience and perception different, but my teens, the years about which I am writing, were anything but typical. Finally, the Budapest I remember was a small city located within a much larger one with which those living in this inner core practically never came in touch. This was typical not only of interwar Budapest, but of most large, industrialized cities whose middle classes had practically no contact with the lower social strata and those regions of the cities in which they lived.

When I was born, in 1919, my father was the manager of a private bank. We lived in a large apartment in the City Park (Városliget) district in a building belonging to a relative. My brother (17 months my junior), I and our nanny each had our own bedrooms as had the cook and the maid who made up the core of the household over which my mother presided. A cleaning woman, a washerwoman, and a seamstress came in at regular intervals to do whatever was assigned to them. Our hair was cut by a barber and our nails by a manicurist who also came to our home. I mention all these people simply to indicate that when I wrote about my experience being atypical I was not exaggerating. When my second brother was born, we moved to the adjacent building (belonging to the same relative) because an additional bedroom was needed.

My first memories are limited to the neighborhood in which we lived. We were taken daily to the City Park where we played with the children of our neighborhood who belonged to the same social stratum. A favorite pastime was sitting on a bench on Stefánia Street and watch people riding in the special

lane which, in those days, was reserved for them. The street also served those who wanted to be seen in their fancy carriages. When these were replaced by automobiles a new game was added to our daily outings: recognizing the make and year of the vehicles. On the way home we religiously stopped at the home of the well-known sculptor, György Zala, hoping to see what he was doing in spite of the fact that the windows of his atelier did not open on the street. This routine was enriched in the Summer by swimming lessons at the Széchenyi bath and in Winter by skating on the frozen lake in City Park. Once artificial ice was installed on parts of the lake, there was no day on which my brother and I did not spend hours racing around the rink and learning to play hockey. To all these activities, all centered in our small world, the City Park, one can add the Zoo, also there, which we visited with clock-like regularity. I recall vividly how disappointed I was with the size of what to me was a huge wild-life preserve when I revisited it some 45 years later.

Not everything was fun and games. Even before we reached school age we had regular music and French lessons, naturally at home, which I resented at the time, but for which I was more than grateful later. Because our nannies were always German speakers, we became trilingual rather early in life. Fun and games continued on week-ends. These had their own routine. My maternal grandparents came to our home early Saturday afternoon, and my father and grandfather promptly settled down to a Hungarian card game (*alsós*) which lasted until the rest of the family arrived for dinner. The winnings, irrespective of whose, were the first pocket money my brother and I received. On Sundays either father or grandfather took us hiking in the hills of Buda. These trips always ended with Wieners, mustard and potato salad in spite of my mother's objections whose healthier lunch we refused. Church going was reserved for Christmas and Easter, and this my brother and I resented because it cancelled our trip to the hills.

When time came to begin school, my mother was afraid of the various illnesses I was certain to bring home. As a result I wound up in a small private school run by a teacher after her regular school hours were over. Classes were about 4-5 students some of whom became good and lasting friends. At the end of every school year, I was taken to the Lutheran Elementary School on Deák tér for comprehensive examinations. My grades and official certificates were issued by this school. As our little school was only five minutes from where we lived, our world remained a small one. Budapest of the 1920s was simply City Park and the Buda hills for me. This is why my real memories all date from the 1930s.

The real change in my life occurred when the time came to go to a real school. This was the Lutheran Gymnasium located in what was then called the

Vilma Királyné út, but was known only as the *Fasor*. This was not a public school, but one of the two best private ones in Budapest. It was close enough to home to walk to it. This was already a great innovation. I think it was the first thing I was allowed to do unsupervised. Nobody knew who joined me on these walks to and from school, and among the schoolmates whom I joined, some much older than I was, were many who came from a different world than the one in which I had lived in until then. The school was excellent and added Latin and English to my collection of languages. It was also a strict school. Only about half of those who entered with me, finished eight years later. I was not a very good student, but good enough to get through the eight years with decent grades. My favorite subjects were history and physical education. I tried my hand at every possible sport the school made available for us. It was through the school and my fellow students that my horizon got broadened more than just intellectually. I visited sections of the city I had never seen before; I heard of life styles and occupations that were never mentioned at home; I learned about problems that never entered my mind earlier. I got involved in numerous activities which neither my parents nor our nanny supervised. School excursion all over the country, Boy Scout camps in a different location every year made me learn as much from life as from school.

While the school was not only excellent, but also remained sane in a growingly insane world (it graduated Jewish students as late as 1944), it was in school that I got introduced to virulent nationalism, to the curious world of politics and fraudulent elections, and to anti-Semitism and later national socialism. These issues were discussed between classes at school and reinforced the message of slogans on the numerous posters one passed all over the city. These issues and discussions became sharper and sharper as the eight years passed. Teachers were demi-gods whom one did not bother with questions like – why are there no Jewish boys in our scout troop? Mother found it below the dignity of a lady to discuss such nobodys as Hitler or his Hungarian imitators, and father was usually too busy for lengthy discussion. This must have been the problem in other families too, because it was our own circle and age group that tried working out these problems for themselves. Why was it all right to learn Spanish, but below a Hungarian's dignity to learn Slovak or Czech? The older we got, the more problems needed answers and the more confused we became.

Yet, in spite of these nagging questions life was pleasant for people like us. It remained pleasant even during the great depression. By that time we had moved away from the City Park neighborhood. My father became general manager of a large factory first and after it merged with another of the new conglomerate. In both cases we moved into service homes in the factory

complexes. These were rather luxurious one family homes adding caretakers to the number of people my mother had to manage. It also changed my life considerably. For the first time, I lived in a blue collar neighborhood, saw homes in which workers lived and played with their sons getting acquainted with their views and problems. These moves also made me more independent.

Walking to school from such outskirts as Kőbánya or the end of Soroksári út was out of the question. Every morning my brother and I were driven in the car that came with father's job to school. On the way we learned a lot of what one may call folk-wisdom from the driver whom we very much liked. From school we went to the house of an aunt where we did our homework and than disappeared, going ice skating or to dancing school (strictly a white glove affair), to be picked up again by the car to go home. The ride home was usually the time when we had our best conversations with our father who came to town every afternoon meeting other top industrialists for a cup of coffee at the Hangli, a coffeehouse in front of the *Vigadó*. There were days, usually once a week, when we stayed in town to go to the opera, the theater or some late sports event. Budapest was, in spite of the depression, a town that glittered. Mihály Székely, Imre Palló, Sándor Svéd, Mária Németh were the great names at the opera, and the Academy of Music, the *Nemzeti Zenede* were just two homes for the excellent orchestral and chamber music events of which Budapest offered more than one practically every night. The theater life was just as lively with the National Theater and the Gaytheater (*Vígszínház*) taking the lead. Operettas were just as well attended as were the night clubs, well known all over Europe, but certainly not to teenagers like I was at the time.

The depression was certainly serious and hit hard outside the narrow inner circle, mentioned at the beginning of this paper. All the cultural activity and glitter just mentioned was limited to a small segment of the city consisting only of Castle Hill in Buda, the strictly limited Inner City, the Andrassy út and the City Park neighborhood. There were nice residential districts also on the Rózsadomb and the Pasaréti út-Hűvösvölgy regions, but what life was in the city took place in the just delimited narrow confines. It was within these confines and nice neighborhoods that youngsters like myself lived their social life also, meeting the proper young ladies, attending their house parties and going out with them.

Social life for teenagers had its strict rules which I, for one, never understood. Why was it all right to go skiing (provided there was enough snow) in mixed company in the hills of Buda, but absolutely out of the question to hike there with the same young ladies in the summer? Why was it perfectly acceptable to invite a young lady to the theater or opera, but never

to a movie? Why was it all right to go to some restaurant (provided one found an open one) at five in the morning after a successful houseparty, but out of the question to have coffee and cake at Gerbaud's after the theater? I am certain that my elders also had some similarly nonsensical conventions, but these did not bother me and my contemporaries.

Completely different rules applied in Summer. Our family went either to Visegrád where grandfather's brother owned a lovely place, or to Lake Balaton, or to some spa in Austria. On "vacation" the general rules did not apply. One could stay out in mixed company and even go to the movies! Visegrád reminds me of something I should have mentioned when I reminisced about my pre-teen. Father was in Budapest working; mother took us to the country. We loved it because there we could add to our dog all kinds of other animals. On Sundays either my father or grandfather came for a visit. On one of these occasions a flea-bitten, poor, little travelling circus was at Visegrád. Grandfather promised to take us, only to find out that he had to return to Budapest before the performance began. He, therefore paid for a special performance attended by him, my brother, myself, and all the village children whom we could find and invite on our way from our house to the circus. Not all Summer memories are this pleasant. I can vividly remember being in a lovely Summer camp for boys on the Ossiachersee in Austria and fighting off the attacking Austrian Hitlerjugend who had a camp nearby and resented that our camp had some Jewish boys also.

By the time I graduated from high school certain things were absolutely certain. Ours was the best high school in the world; "Ferencváros," better known as "Fradi," was the best soccer team and Sárosi the best soccer player of all times; only Hungarians could fence with swords or play waterpolo; Hungarian women were the most beautiful in the world as proven by Erzsi Simon who won the first Miss Europe contest, and there was a certain hierarchy in the family, society and country which one did not question. One admired Bartók, but preferred Kodály's music because it was more "Hungarian." *War and Peace* and *The Magic Mountain* were books one had to read and was able to discuss, but what one really enjoyed were the novels of Lajos Zilahy. Society's painters were not members of the avant-garde, but portraitist like Fülöp László (Philip de Laszlo) and Lajos Márk. Getting drunk was frowned on, and just as smoking, was strictly forbidden, but a young man was expected to know and appreciate a good wine. In this manner everything and everybody had his/her/its assigned place, which was as it should have been.

Unfortunately not all our "certainties" were as free of dangerous assumptions as were the above. We all knew that the four statues on Szabadság tér (Liberty Square) represented not only territories taken unjustly from Hungary

at the end of World War I, but also the neighbors who took these and who were still intriguing against Hungary. They were responsible for all the ills of nation, country and society and it was inevitable that sooner or later accounts with them had to be settled. The steadily growing integral nationalistic propaganda was reinforced in the 1930s more and more by racist thinking which relegated not only Jews, but also the country's "criminal" neighbors into a group of inferior human beings which made their "momentary" superior position even less acceptable. As Hitler's star rose higher and higher, the revisionist and racist tension increased in Budapest also splitting even such a relatively close knit group as my high school class. Famous events, like the visit of the King of Italy or the Eucharistic Congress of 1938 were interpreted as indications by foreign powers and the Church that the revisionist line was the correct one.

My father was one of those who did not agree with the more and more dominant way of thinking. He believed that between 1937 and 1940 either Fascism/National Socialism will be eliminated by the Western powers or World War II will break out. He wanted his sons as far away from Hungary as possible during these years. As a result, he made me join the army as soon as I graduated (Summer of 1937), and I spent the last 18 months of my life in Budapest in the barracks of an artillery regiment on Hungária körút.

The regiment was in fact a cadre organization around which several artillery regiments could be formed in time of mobilization. Every high-school graduate was, according to Hungarian law, entitled to enter reserve officers' school once called to the colors. Each battery had a separate dormitory for these young men keeping them segregated from those whom they might command one day. In the regiment I lived in a world that was totally new to me. It was a combination of old, aristocratic and new, more-and-more racist Hungary. The first motorized batteries were assigned those high school/university graduates who were members of either gentry or noble families. Horse drawn cannon or howitzer units were the destination of people like myself. The mountain batteries whose officers had to walk just like the rest of the men were the ones to which the sons of lower middle class or even lower ranking families were assigned.

The atmosphere was both super-nationalistic and racist. We had two dogs running around and living in the barracks. Their names were Masaryk and Beneš. No noble could flunk officers' school, but not even the brightest Jewish university graduate could pass. Our officers were, on the whole, reasonable and tried to treat their men decently. They handled us, officer candidates – Jews included – as young gentlemen. The real monsters came from the rank of the non-commissioned officers. They were often sadistic, openly anti-Semitic,

but, fortunately, in most cases bribable. The two occasions when I was sent with an M. P. patrol to find soldiers in off limit places on Saturday nights showed me a Budapest I never dreamt existed. These were incredibly filthy and dingy bars in the suburbs or houses of ill repute in red light districts in areas whose names I only seldom heard previously. I heard language which was absolutely foreign to me and saw poverty compared to which even the workers' homes around the factories in which we lived were palaces. Yet, these places were Budapest, too!

When my service ended, I left Budapest on an extended business trip arranged by my father's factory. I did not have the slightest indication that this journey will lead into emigration and that I will not see Budapest for 25 years. When I finally returned, I returned to the small Budapest situated in the middle of an even larger greater Budapest than was the one I had left. At first sight nothing had changed, except the dome on top of the Royal Castle and the names of most streets with which I was familiar. I realized that the Budapest of my teens was gone as soon as I entered buildings which looked unchanged from the outside. Today's Budapest is, again, different from the one I visited in 1964. I have no right or competence to judge which of the various Budapests was/is the best. For me the little city in which I moved around as a teenager will remain the one I truly loved and appreciated.