

François Fejtő and Hungary in the 1930s

François Fejtő was a mere 29 years of age when he left his native country in 1938. This period is marked in his bibliography of works written in Hungary by nearly three hundred studies and book reviews. In my lecture, I present the beginnings of François Fejtő's career in the 30s, his conflicts with the ruling (Horthy) regime and the lasting footprints he left in the culture of the Hungarian nation, in literature and in journalism. I endeavour to represent the dynamics of sympathies and antipathies and to provide an overview of the intellectual tendencies characteristic of Hungary at the time.

I would begin by quoting István Bibó's¹ characterization of Hungary between the two world wars. "...at its inception and decline, it was a semi-fascist regime, while in the interim period, during the consolidation, it was a conservative police state".²

Fejtő's career began towards the end of the period of consolidation³ associated with the name of István Bethlen, at the time of the world economic crisis. He left the country in the early days of a government drifting towards the extreme right under the leadership of Béla Imrédy, who was executed in 1946 as a war criminal.⁴ His Jewish ancestry played *no* role in his resolution to leave the country, although this issue carried considerable weight in his life and decisions. At the University of Pécs he had suffered turulist⁵ raids when his rebellious fellow students had called on Jewish students to leave the auditorium before the lecturing professor

¹ István Bibó (1911-1979), lawyer and politician, member of the government in 1956. The translation of this quotation is cited from a translation of Péter Esterházy's *A Little Hungarian Pornography*, translated by Judith Sollosy. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997

² István Bibó: Levél Borbándi Gyulához [Letter to Gyula Borbándi]. *Bibó István összegyűjtött munkái 3. [Collected works of István Bibó 3.]* Redacted by István Kemény and Mátyás Sárközi. Pres: Európai Protestáns Magyar Szabadegyetem [*European Protestant Free University*], 1983, 830. Fejtő also devotes a chapter to the consolidation of the Horthy regime in his memoirs.

³ Ignác Romsics: *István Bethlen: A Great Conservative Statesman of Hungary, 1874-1946*. Social Science Monographs, Boulder, Colorado. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.

⁴ A piece of writing by Fejtő entitled *Makói beszélgetések [Conversations in Makó]* was published in the Hungarian daily *Népszava* on 13 February 1938. On the day following publication, police officers appeared in Fejtő's flat, informing him that he had been charged with sedition. Fejtő was sentenced to six months' imprisonment. He left before the sentence in second instance was passed, because his passport had not been confiscated.

⁵ The *Turul* was an extreme-right anti-Semitic student association, similar to the German *Burschenschaftis*. (Equally rightist was the Catholic but apolitical federation *Americana*.)

arrived. The university did not stand up for its students.⁶ However, he had considerably more positive experiences, both intellectual and sensual delights. He was a dynamic young man who envisioned pursuing a career in his home country.

The events that set his feelings and intellect off took place mostly outside the boundaries of the university. (He was also touched by the *elitist* air of *Eötvös Collegium*, an island of *liberalism* in the Hungarian capital. He would have been eligible for admission to the *Collegium*, which was organized along the lines of a French example, *Ecolé Normale Superieur*, because he won the national academic competition for secondary school students ; however, a prerequisite for admission would have been conversion to Catholicism. And although he soon did convert, at the time he would not do so “for formal reasons”, not even for the sake of a favourable intellectual climate, as requested by the college principal. (Out of interest, no. Voluntarily, in a few months, yes.)

He was exposed to concurrent influences in the *populist* Miklós Bartha Society and among *communists*. Moreover, he acquainted himself at a fairly early age with one of the most influential Hungarian poets of the 20th century, Attila József,⁷ four years his senior. (This deserves emphasis in part because contemporaries hardly recognised Attila József’s talent and magnitude. Fejtő was among the few to perceive his talent unfold.) The intellectual appetite of the young man in his twenties is reflected by a list of books about which he wrote studies not much later.⁸

In a rather short time François Fejtő was done with the early and often contradictory ideological influences to which he was exposed. The great worker demonstration held in Budapest in 1930 pushed him towards Marxist socialism, but he soon realised that the cadre of communists were mediocre, they used a primitive sectarian tone in their brochures, and he felt that the atmosphere around them was unbearable in human terms. He was imprisoned for passing out communist flyers at the university, a relatively insignificant event of which the police nonetheless obtained intelligence. It was at that time that Hitler seized power in Germany. After the 1-2 year period of his flirtation with communist ideology, Fejtő was sobered up by the *circumstances* of the subsequent dictator’s rise to power. The world knew hardly anything about the personality of the dictator to be. However, the dismaying willingness of the German communists to ally themselves with Adolf Hitler merely in order to overthrow the social democrats opened up his eyes immediately. The sister parties – while I am aware that this expression is an anachronism –, i.e. the parties that sought the freedom of man and liberation of workers, did not behave like relatives. To put it more precisely, communists terminated their theoretical relationship with the social democrats.

⁶ Anti-Semitism in this era was an issue of the middle class. See Mária Kovács M. *Luttes professionnelles et antisémitisme. chronique de la Montée du fascisme dans le corps médical hongrois. 1920-1944. Actes des Recherches en Sciences Sociales* “L’Antisémitisme” special issue. Paris: 1985.

⁷ Attila József: *Aimez moi. L’œuvre poétique. Écrits intimes*. Edited by Georges Kassaï and Jean-Pierre Sicre Paris: Phébus, 2005.

⁸ Only a few names and subjects: Rotterdami Erasmus, Louise-Ferdinand Céline, Alfred Döblin, Aldous Huxley, Stefan George, Thomas Mann, Romain Rolland, Oswald Spengler etc. Or. behaviourism, philosophies of crisis, etc.

Having been released from prison after six months (he was not allowed to graduate, as he had been stigmatised as a communist), Fejtő set out on a major journey. He visited his Croatian kinsmen in the south, who in the meantime found themselves on the far side of an international border. (He had been born a citizen of the multinational Austro-Hungarian Monarchy – and, as a result, he was more open to seeking a meeting point of various cultures.) The journey was also a study trip that helped expose him to “the forms of socialism rooted in western culture, leaving the fanatical, barbarian and awkward forms of vulgar Marxism behind”. One of his most beautiful works, *Érzelmes utazás [Sentimental Journey]*, touches on the radical changes that took place in his ideological “tastes” (I am pleased to note that *Voyage sentimental* has been available in French translation since 2001).⁹ To quote the author, in this work Fejtő “constructs” his new ideology. What is this new philosophy or ideology? “It will have freedom, an opportunity for heresy, to which I am inclined; and it will have discipline, in the absence of which freedom is deconstruction and frivolity. It will have an opportunity for alliances, for community, and, at the same time, for hygienic loneliness. Independence from prejudices and requirements, and, at the same time, a humble homage to the ultimate truths that make life worth living. It will have awe and irony, a joint cult of writing and humanity, clever bravery and a sufficient amount of cowardice, balance and feelers put out. I believe I have understood the western spirit, whose secret lies precisely in this balance between destructive and constructive behaviours. Patient sobriety, but also some kind of madness and some kind of faith are equally necessary for a man to be able to create. In my ideology, I provide for such necessary madness, a few obsessive ideas that I do not want to abandon. Such « idées fixes » are to identify with the cause of the unfortunate and the poor in general. It is madness, because in terms of my ancestry, learning and needs, I am a bourgeois, because I like bourgeois comfort, doubt and security, a bourgeois diet and self-esteem, second class compartments and the front rows of the stalls.” Finally, he sums himself up as “a millionaire of needs and a pocket proletarian”.¹⁰ (His bourgeois family, his publisher and book trader father incurred losses from the dissolution of the Monarchy, and the consequences of the economic crisis also affected them severely.)

The “frivolous” tone of the book – that a communist should find delight in the joys of sunshine and the sea, instead of discussing the class struggle – disturbed the relentless illegal communist politicians. Even at the time, the book was read as an aestheticized form of renegadism.

Another step in Fejtő’s growing disillusionment with communism was the publication of André Gide’s book - *Retour de l’ URSS*. Fejtő wrote a study on the book (December 1936).¹¹ The situation was rather absurd, showing how relative the value of a work may be in various environments. Tibor Déry was convicted for having translated the book, which was seen by the government as a work of

⁹ François Fejtő: *Voyage sentimental*. Traduction de Georges Kassai, Gilles Bellamy et Marie-Louise Tardes-Kassai revue et complétée par l’auteur. Paris: Édition des Syrtes, 2001.

¹⁰ In French see *Voyage sentimental*, 155-158

¹¹ Fejtő Ferenc: “Ami fontosabb Oroszországnál is” [“What is even more important than Russia”]. André Gide: *Retour de l’ U.R.S.S.* *Szép Szó*, 1936, Volume III, December.

communist propaganda. At the same time, Fejtő wrote a passionate, intensely anti-Stalinist study on it.

While Fejtő became a contributor to the key literary journal of the era, *Nyugat*¹² [*West*] (he also contributed to other periodicals, including *Válasz* [*Answer*], an organ of the literary populists, and the *Marxist* journal *Korunk* [*Our Age*], as well as a few journals of small circulation close to the *avant-garde*, such as *Magyar Írás* [*Hungarian Writing*]), and also became part of the circle of *Szocializmus* [*Socialism*], he did not actually have a forum of his own. *Nyugat* tended to address questions of abstract aesthetics. Although in the 30s *Nyugat* opened up to social and ideological issues, it nonetheless gave only limited attention to such questions. Fejtő needed a new journal, one of his own, i.e. an organ of the media that was concurrently ideological and generation-specific. And just such a journal was created, entitled *Szép Szó* [*Beautiful Word*]. (The journal was also necessary because the co-editor, the poet Attila József, was a man with an incurably bruised psyche incompatible with many people. His life story and disposition sensitized him, making him a difficult person, though this may well have been the source of his increasingly grave, noble, and tragic poetry. It was he who needed a home base.) *Szép Szó* was a media organ of the social democratic, liberal and bourgeois radical left. It displayed Europeanism and democracy on its banner. At the same time, it represented the urbanist side in the populist-urbanist confrontation, a major literary and ideological debate of the era.

It is difficult to explain to anyone other than a native Hungarian or to those unfamiliar with the history of Hungary what the populist-urbanist controversy meant. I am aware that the term “urbanist” [urbanite, urbanism] cannot be used in French, because it refers to the science of town planning, and the comparison of the “sinful city” (which was an expression frequently used by Hungarian regent Miklós Horthy) with the pure life of the peasantry was only seen in the writings of the extreme right as a maximum, particularly in the initial times of the Pétain era. In Hungarian, the expression ‘urbanist’ was a code name that implicitly designated the Jewish left wing. And, one should add that urbanists, and, accordingly, the circles of *Szép Szó*, constituted a small society forced into the “ghetto”, because the Horthy regime managed to associate every concept of leftism with Jewry. (The term ‘populist’ also carries a special meaning in the history of Hungarian literature, and it does not fully cover the denotation of ‘populist’ in a political sense.)

The urbanists were not pleased with the fact that the literary circles (of populist literature) were flirting with politics, worded petitions, and expected help from the ruling class. They used strong metaphors – although they emerged in the realm of politics, where they should have acted on a clear and lucid ideology, as a

¹² The literary journal *Nyugat*, which was launched in 1908, is usually compared with *RNF*. See Tverdota György: *A Nyugat és a Nouvelle Revue Française első két évtizede* [The first two decades of the *Nyugat* and the *RNF*]. In: Angyalosi Gergely, E. Csorba Csilla, Kulcsár Szabó Ernő, Tverdota György (szerk.): *Nyugat népe. Tanulmányok a Nyugatról és koráról* [Essays on the *Nyugat* and its era]. Budapest: Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum, 2009. 342-357.

political party¹³ (The Hungarian National Peasant Party was only founded in 1939). But Hungary was an underdeveloped agrarian-industrial country, and the peasantry only began to achieve political representation in 1939. Huge lands were in the hands of a relatively small percentage of the population, the distribution of estates was disproportionate, and the masses of paupers were considerable in size.¹⁴ (In contrast, in France similar social inequalities were eliminated in the 19th century after the revolution of 1789, and emancipation of urban wage labourers was in the foreground of movements for social reform. But even in the countries neighbouring Hungary, in the so-called successor states, the problem was settled after the restructuring brought about by Trianon – of all things! – at the latest). The Hungarian populists built their social reformism on the peasantry, contrasting it with the bourgeoisie.

Hungarian populist writers were great at giving diagnoses at the level of literature, but what they did only upset the ruling class. However, Fejtő was fair to his adversaries. As he wrote, he was worried watching the group of populist writers: “This intelligentsia masters goal-setting better than methods, and ideals more than practice, and it is uneducated and inexperienced in politics. But those that underrate them for their Utopian approach and lack of clarity, go wrong ...”.¹⁵

Populist literature – and I am quoting Fejtő’s interpretation– is related to the so-called *narodniks* and political *populists*, a certain French movement – “back to the land” – associated with the name of the extreme nationalist Maurice Barrés. After the First World War a few writers – Henri Pourrat, Eugène Dabik – were identified as populists because they preferred plebeian subjects (mostly depicting the poverty of workers) to those of the bourgeoisie. (In Hungary, the bourgeoisie was not very strong, and it continued to decline after the two failed revolutions because a considerable part of the bourgeoisie had Jewish origins.) That is difficult to understand from a French perspective, as the French audience would have appreciated the sociographic work by Gyula Illyés *A puszták népe* [*People of the puszta*] as much as they did the works by French writers on colonial oppression, for example *Travels in the Congo*, i.e. *Voyage au Congo* by André Gide (or the book by Andrée Viollis). French anti-colonialism was typically reflected in literature as progressive *bourgeois* and *socialist* movements.

Notions in our language and in our past – and, certainly, also in our present – have quite different meanings from those in French. If anything, this was one of François Fejtő’s strengths: concurrently seeing certain phenomena of various European countries, in the world and during his emigration, whether they were obviously similar or apparently unrelated. He had an ability to discern, point out and compare tendencies. His calling as an expert on “Central East Europe”, pursued for decades with AFP and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, was not

¹³ In a pamphlet containing a polemic against the populists, Fejtő wrote about the difference in approaches. “We must acknowledge that Marx did not write a heroic poem about the 19th century, but criticized its economy.” Magyar *narodnikik* [Hungarian *narodniks*]. *Szocializmus* [Socialism]. 1935. Vol XXV. N° 1. 10-14.

¹⁴ A contemporary study was given this subsequently sloganized title: *A country of three million beggars*. [Oláh György: *A hárommillió koldus országa*. Miskolc: Magyar Jövő Könyvnyomda. 1929].

¹⁵ Fejtő Ferenc: Magyar *narodnikik* [Hungarian *narodniks*] *op. cit.*:13.

merely a result of the new lifestyle, the urge of existence. It was more deeply rooted, going back to the publications of the 30s in Hungary. As he stated in the previously cited *Sentimental Journey*: “I attach more value to debate than to doctrine”. While he was in his native country, numerous distinct organs of the media representing conflicting positions offered to publish him, because his tone was not exclusionary, even if it was sharp at times. A number of his writings were cast in a telling dialogical form. If he did not have a real debate partner, he invented one. The form of dialogues provided an opportunity to imitate real conversations. The author himself presented statements and refutations. He was characterised by “critical sympathy” even when he faced writings or authors problematic to him.

His life also challenged another dogma, namely, that a person can only have a single identity. He had multiple identities. He was and remained Hungarian, but he became French. He was and remained Jewish, but he was also Catholic. And, of course, he was a bourgeois and a social democrat. In the Horthy era he was forced to leave because he was a bourgeois and a social democrat. In the Kádár regime, again, he was forced to stay away because he was a bourgeois and a social democrat.

After 1989, Ferenc-François Fejtő found his way home. He was a Hungarian citizen and a Hungarian social democrat, as he had been all along. But certainly he was a citizen and social democrat of France, as well. Hungarians are not oblivious to the fact that he wrote the major part of his oeuvre here. He spent the longer half of his life here. We have no reason to be proud of this, though we do have cause to be grateful.