

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND HISTORY

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This article is a verbatim reproduction of a talk. In it I posed two questions: 1. To what extent my writing of Hungarian history, 1944–1948 was influenced by my past? 2. To what extent my writing of an autobiography was influenced by the fact that I am a historian?

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Readers of my autobiography have often commented that I had led an interesting life. I could not agree. It did not seem to me that way. It is true that I survived the Nazis. I survived because of a series of accidents. At one point I marched in front of the Hungarian Nazis. It is true that my father’s side of the family was completely eliminated. Under communism my stepfather’s businesses were nationalized, and we had to move several times. Later I was thrown out of the communist youth organization because I spoke disrespectfully about Soviet films, even though at the time I considered myself a communist, and as a consequence perhaps, I could not attend the university after my matriculation, but had to work in a community kitchen where I saw how really poor people lived. I had an opportunity to watch the great revolution of 1956. I was at Kossuth square when Imre Nagy spoke on October 23<sup>rd</sup>. And then after some adventures I managed to get myself to Vienna, where I had no money and did not know what to do with myself. I had to fend for myself by buying and selling forints, the Hungarian currency. Crossing the border was the only time in my life when I thought that my life was interesting and in fact while attempting to cross the border, I saw myself as if I was an actor in a movie. I saw myself from the outside. To be precise, I saw myself as if I was in that great film, *Grand Illusion*, as the French prisoners of war in WWI were escaping from a German prison into Switzerland. But while I lived my life, my life as a whole did not seem interesting to me, because the events in it were banal. They were banal in the sense that my

story was the story of a generation. As far as I recall, in my school there was almost no one who had both a mother and a father alive. Whatever you say about Eastern Europe, you must admit that it produces interesting histories. The fact is that as I lived my life I did not consider it particularly interesting and looking back at it now, it still seems to me not out of the ordinary. In any case, the task of the writer of the autobiography is to attempt to see the world as his subject saw it at the time. When everyone around you had similar experiences, your life could not have seemed strange to you. But surely, the interest in an autobiography, or, for that matter in any biography does not depend on the unusual nature of the life that is being described. It depends on to what extent the writer can find something in a life described that is relevant to others. It is a trivial observation that every life is different and yet, we as human beings also share a great deal. So the biographer, or autobiographer, must find in his subject that is unique and at the same time also relevant to others. Inherently every life is equally interesting.

Pleasures and problems of writing autobiographies:

1. I like to read biographies and autobiographies. Biography is a genre that resists the post-modern. There are not many post-modern autobiographies. Each must tell a story that has a beginning, a middle and an end. Autobiography is a conservative genre. It is often a good read. Not difficult to comprehend what it is all about.

2. In autobiographies, with few exceptions, I found the most interesting part the one dealing with childhood. There is something inherently interesting in a *Bildungsroman*, in the acquisition of consciousness, the gradual awakening, but that is not all. It is the attitude of the writer to different segments of his life that is the most important. Russian literature in particular is rich in great autobiographies, but there also, it is always the earliest part that is most interesting. Herzen might be an exception, but then he does not really write about his adult self, but describes the world in which he lived, which is a different matter. My autobiography ends at a time when I was twenty. I have no desire and no ability to write about my adult self. Writing about your adult self in any case presents problems. By contrast, writing about yourself as a child you can see yourself from the outside, and at the same time at least you can make an attempt to recall how you saw the world at the time. This duality makes the writing interesting. You can write about yourself with a smiling condescension. This cannot work when you write about yourself as an adult: what are you going to say: look what a fine chap I am? You may think that in your heart of hearts, indeed I hope you do, but that does not make satisfying reading. There is a great danger in these autobiographies: shall I describe myself as an outstanding person? a just and courageous man? How I have been right about just about everything? That does not make good reading. On the other hand, it also does not work if you just run yourself down. Your readers should like the central character, in spite of all. Make confessions? I am a

poor sinner? There is something distasteful about that also. In fact you cannot have a critical distance from yourself. Orwell wrote somewhere that a genuine autobiography must be full of description of black spots, for we all experience life as a series of defeats. This may have been true about him, but I do not think it is true about me. I have experienced moments that were and seemed like defeats, but would not overemphasize these.

3. Writing about oneself, or indeed, writing about others, fixes a story: I cannot help now but see my past as what I had written. Writing an autobiography makes order in your life. Now there is a master narrative. I could not now tell my story differently. It was to some extent an accident which particular episodes then I focused on, but now my life is what is in the book. But, after all, it is only my childhood that is complete. My adult self is still in a stage of becoming.

4. The question that is relevant to my topic is to what extent it influenced my writing that I am a professional historian. Needless to say, at the time when I was writing I never posed myself this question. I was not writing history. I did not consult documents. Do historians write different autobiographies? It is understandable why historians would be attracted to this genre. After all, by definition, they are interested in the past and accustomed to telling stories in a chronological order in a linear fashion. The major difference is, of course, that an autobiography is by necessity subjective, and we as historians are trained to strive for objectivity. And yes, presumably, I paid more attention to the historical circumstances in which I lived than an autobiographer whose profession was different. My scholarly field is Soviet history. Perhaps because of that I spent more time in my writing posing the question how my political ideas developed, what I thought of Russians, etc. On the other hand, we lived in an age when history mattered. I cannot recall a time when I was not interested in world affairs. Interest in politics was not an academic interest. One of my earliest memories is that as a 6 year old I was listening to BBC and learned of the Allied invasion of Sicily and be delighted by this news. World affairs had a great relevance to our daily lives. I don't see how one could disregard in the story of his life the great events that took place around us.

5. Another question is: are our memories as reliable as writing on history should be. Memories are demonstrably faulty. There is a moment that I recall clearly when I saw my first Russian soldier. Unfortunately, my cousin who was there recalls it differently. In fact in such a way as to be less complimentary to me. I am enough of a historian as to be compelled to include both versions in my book. Perhaps not for history writing, but for writing an autobiography these small details do not matter. I think memories are reliable enough to recall a basic picture how we saw life at the time. The difficulty of the writer is the same as of the historian: not to be anachronistic. How not to know everything that we know now and did not know then.

The second main topic I want to discuss is a more interesting one: to what extent my life influenced and still influences my history writing. This is a treacherous issue: why do we do what we do and why do we believe what we do believe? On the one hand, it would be absurd to deny that our experiences at least contribute to forming our worldview. After all, if our mindset is not the consequence of environment then what? I suppose then we are forced to believe that God breathed into us an individual, independent, autonomous mind, but that for many of us, including me is unacceptable. Furthermore, it is obvious and easily demonstrable how my experiences and thoughts are connected. One could argue, for example, that I became a historian of Russia, because I love Russians, since they had saved my life in 1945. Indeed, since that time I have learned a great deal about Russians, Bolshevism, or what have you, but a certain amount of love, a residue remained. Just like cosmic radiation after the big bang. But, surely, hundreds of thousands of people were saved by Russians in similar circumstances and not only did they not become Russian historians, but they do not even like Russians. My cousin, for example, with whom I lived through the dreadful years of 1944–1945 and consequently experienced the same material world as I did, disliked Russians from the first moment and still dislikes them and has always been a great fan of the Americans. In retrospect we can explain everything and at the same time we can predict nothing. Had I become a musician, now I might argue that the great emotional experiences of the traumas that I live through predisposed me to find solace in music. In retrospect anything can be justified and explained. Everything makes perfect sense. In spite of the obviousness of how much we are influenced by our experiences, there is something in us that rebels against the notion that we are nothing but the end result of genes and experiences. That would pretty much nullify the truth-value of our beliefs. That would make conversations pointless. I would just say I don't like Nazis because of 1944 and you would say I do not like communists because of 1945. And that is that. I don't like Nazis because they killed my father and you don't like communists because they deported you and your family. In fact showing that we believe in them for irrelevant or even mistaken reasons cannot dismiss arguments. Arguments must be shown to be faulty, lacking intellectual coherence, contradicting facts, as we know them.

To what extent does it matter that I actually lived through that period and I remember it rather well? At one point in my book I actually footnoted myself. I was standing behind a Russian truck and was asking for bread, and a Russian soldier took pity on me. Needless to say while I was writing the problem did not occur to me. I chose this topic, I thought, because interesting archives were available in Budapest. In retrospect, it is possible that I was attracted to the topic because of its autobiographical significance. It is possible, but not certain. After all, people write on topics, which have no immediate significance to them. I wrote

a couple of books on the White movement in the Russian Civil War, a topic that is difficult to relate to my personal problems.

Recently appeared a book by László Borhi, *Hungary in the Cold War, 1945–1956*. Borhi deals with the same time period and he read pretty much the same books and worked in the same archives as I, and yet our approaches differ from one another greatly. It is possible but by no means certain that a source of the difference is that I lived through that period and Borhi who is much younger than I, did not. That does not make my conclusions any more valid. In fact one might argue the contrary, and say that he has a degree of objectivity that I lack. I do not believe that that is true, but nonetheless it is a plausible argument. I heard people argue that the history of Nazism could be written only a hundred year from now, because we can be perfectly objective only then. I do not mean to criticize Borhi's book, a book, which presumably you have not read, but I intend to use him as a foil to demonstrate two different approaches.

When I compare my book to Borhi's, I see major differences. Can these be the result of my biases, which in turn are the consequences of my past? How do we know?

1. First of all, the difference between Borhi's approach and mine is that I see the post war period in much more positive light than he does. Although in retrospect it is evident that nothing that the non-communist politicians could have done would have prevented the demise of democracy, this was not at all evident to contemporaries. Writing about the period 1945–1948, one finds it difficult to keep in mind that contemporaries could not have known that the establishment of a pluralist, liberal political order in Hungary after the Second World War was not within the realm of the possible. Many people at the time had serious concerns about the future, but it was not at all naïve to believe that at the conclusion of the peace treaty Soviet troops would leave Hungary, and then a democratic regime might let roots down and firmly establish itself. The non-communist parties based their policies on this expectation, and, the communists by contrast, feared that their opponents might be right, in which case they would have the frightening prospect of being left without Soviet protection. After a great conflagration people often assume that life could not simply return to what had existed before. They think that the old way of thinking is discredited by the misfortunes it had caused and now there is a possibility for something profoundly different and also better to be built. In Hungary also there was a sense, to be sure, not shared by everyone that a new and better life would begin. I write about this optimism because I can recall it so well. Did it matter? I think it did because it explains to some extent the behavior of contemporaries who had no way of knowing what was to come.

We will never know what kind of politics would have developed if the Russians had withdrawn in 1948, as they had promised. Although in the

immediate post-war years conservative nationalists were in retreat, most likely they would have reemerged once again within a few years as a major current in politics. As it was, only Cardinal Mindszenty and the courageous Catholic nun, Margit Slachta dared to speak up for an unabashedly conservative, and even legitimist position. The liberal consensus that seemed to exist at the end of the war probably would not have lasted. Quite likely bitter political divisions would have reemerged. It is, however, evident that genuine democrats were in a strong position, and it seems likely that the Hungarians left to themselves, would have established a far more decent system than the one which was imposed on them by the Soviet supported communists. Greece, for example, which had the good fortune to escape communist rule, experienced repression and civil war in the postwar period and semi-fascist military regime for a time, nevertheless it far outstripped Hungary in the speed of economic development, and finally established a democratic regime much earlier than the ex-satellites were able to do.

Among the non-communist politicians the reoccurring issue remained what attitude to take to increasing communist domination? Should the communists be resisted every step of the way, or, on the contrary, should liberals be looking for a *modus vivendi* and preserve as much freedom and democracy as they could under the difficult circumstances. Neither side was right and neither side was wrong, since the ultimate fate of the country was decided elsewhere; nevertheless those who did everything within their power to find a compromise deserve credit rather than blame.

I see the postwar period as something different from what was to follow. For me 1944–1947 was a period of imperfect pluralism, it was a time when different points of view could still be articulated. It was imperfect because from the outset the communists benefited from the presence of the Red Army and could prevail in matters that seemed decisively important to them. The same issue could be phrased differently. Were the Russians determined to reduce the countries of Eastern Europe, including Hungary, of course, into satellites at the outset, or their policy developed gradually? This is the most debated issue in the history of the origin of the cold war. For Borhi the Russians were determined to make Hungary into a satellite at the outset. There is really not much reason for him to discuss the evolution of Soviet policy, because he does not see much evolution. In my view Stalin's policy only gradually evolved. We agree that the fate of Hungary was determined elsewhere. It is the development of Russian policy we disagree about. Am I more forgiving of the Russians because they saved my life? Should I be perhaps disqualified as an objective judge because the Russians in a most direct sense saved my life? For some the arrival of the Russian forces was occupation, but for me it was liberation. But I do recall the degree of optimism that surrounded us, at least people in my circles. And I know that the great Hungarian liberal

political philosopher, not a Jew, István Bibó, wrote about this period as the only in his life when living was worthwhile.

It was neither the first nor the last time that the fate of the small countries in Eastern Europe was determined elsewhere. The ultimate outcome depended not on what the Hungarians, Romanians, Poles, etc. would or would not do, but on decisions made in world capitals. Post-war international affairs and internal Soviet developments had more to do with the establishment of a communist regime than what happened in Hungary itself. It is easy to answer the question why in 1948 the communists came to power. That happened because people in Moscow decided that this was in the best interest of the Soviet Union. One can chart the evolution of Soviet foreign policy in the post-war years. In 1944 Stalin instructed the Hungarian communists to be moderate and patient and pose as defenders of private property. At the outset the Soviet authorities helped in the establishment of non-communist parties and were active agents in creating a meaningful coalition of genuine political forces in Hungary. Their main interest at this point seemed to be the exploitation of Hungarian resources. They simply wanted to take as much and as quickly as possible. For Borhi the exploitation of Hungary was a step of integrating Hungary into the Soviet economic sphere. I see it differently. For me it seems that the Russians simply did not care a great deal about the reconstruction of a country that in a few years would become their satellite. Only when it was clear that Hungary would be a satellite did the Russians start to care more about the health of the Hungarian economy. Gradually, Soviet intervention in Hungarian political life became more blatant. By 1947 with the utterly lawless arrest of Béla Kovács on trumped up charges, they demonstrated that they were the real masters in the occupied country. We can date the final decision to create a group of satellites including Hungary. This happened in September 1947 when at Szklarska Poreba Stalin's representatives, Andrei Zhdanov and Georgii Malenkov, informed the assembled Eastern European communist leaders that there could be no middle way between the two hostile blocs. This declaration instructed the Hungarian communists that the time had come to take power, and the age of coalition politics was over.

Stalin did not confide his innermost thoughts to others or put his plans on paper, but it appears that he had not foreseen the emergence of two hostile blocs in Europe. He apparently hoped at first that through the Italian and French communist parties the Soviet Union could have a say in Western European politics. The expectation of a fluid Europe presupposed a situation in which the Soviet Union could prevent the emergence of hostile regimes on its most sensitive Western borders, while refraining at least for the time being, from openly imposing satellite regimes on the occupied countries. In order to hope to have influence in Western Europe the Soviet Union would have to make concessions to the Allies in the East of the continent.

2. The second difference is the consequence of our different attitudes to the Horthy regime. In my view, more than any other country in this region Hungary needed a social revolution. There were countries poorer and more miserable in Eastern Europe than Hungary at the end of the war, but nowhere else did a feudal social and political structure survive almost unscathed into the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century as it did in Hungary. It is fair to say that up to October 15<sup>th</sup> 1944, large landowners ruled the country. The opposition to this regime came not from the left, which had been weak, but from the radical right. The first major blow to the old order came with the takeover by the Hungarian Nazis in October 1944. But the real social revolution took place only after Soviet victory. The crucial part of this revolution was a land reform carried out under communist auspices. Undoubtedly land reform would have taken place even without Soviet encouragement and participation; however the character and speed of the reform was very much influenced by the Red Army's presence. It is fair to say that Hungary experienced the greatest social revolution of its history in this period. Am I more hostile to the Horthy regime than Borhi, because that regime carried out explicitly anti-Semitic policies and was complicit of mass murder of Jews?

The history of these years is a divisive subject in current Hungarian political life. Tell me what is your view of the pre-war Horthy regime and I will know which political party you support today. Liberal and socialist historians look favorably on the achievements of the social revolution that took place at this time and find inspiration in the avowed aims of democratic and progressive politicians of that time. By contrast, nationalists and conservatives who find much to admire in the nation's pre-1945 history are less likely to be impressed by the destruction of the pre-war social order. For them this period is characterized only by the underhanded methods used by communists in their struggle for power. They date the beginning of Soviet oppression immediately to the end of the war. It is perfectly possible that I am more hostile to the Horthy regime because of my background, i.e., being Jewish, and therefore more appreciative of the genuine social revolution that took place in Hungary in these years.

3. The third difference is the Jewish issue. My Jewishness maybe the reason that in my book I attributed a far larger role to this matter than Borhi did. A decisively important fact was that in Hungary, unlike anywhere else in Eastern Europe, that top leadership was entirely Jewish. The four people who made up the top of the hierarchy were four Jews; all of them had spent the war years in Moscow, and very likely their stay in the Soviet capital had deformed them as human beings. From the point of view of the Hungarians this made the top leadership doubly alien: they were the agents of Moscow, and as far as the majority of Hungarians were concerned, they were not considered Hungarian at all. Of course, the communists did not consider themselves Jewish, but there was nothing that they could do to prevent others from considering them Jewish. The

communists well aware of the problems of being identified as Jews leading a Jewish party, being regarded as aliens, attempted to play the nationalist card. In this they were rarely successful. They did everything within their power to cover up their background. The party made great efforts to recruit ex-Nazi party members who had played only minor roles in politics in the past. Consequently, in the localities some of the party secretaries were explicitly anti-Semitic. The question of Jews consciously carrying out anti-Semitic policies is fascinating to me.

In Hungary, as in other unfortunate countries of Eastern Europe, history matters and current issues are fought out in the guise of historical debates. Borhi finds the courage of Mindszenty an inspiration. For me his legacy is an unfortunate one: he was a reactionary, who had only contempt for the modern world, a legitimist, who liked the liberal West only because it seemed to be an ally against the hated communists. I, by contrast am impressed by the strength of indigenous democratic forces after the war. It is true that the right wing of the political spectrum was disenfranchised. The majority of the Hungarian people who voted for the most popular party, the Smallholders Party, approved its progressive stance. Zoltán Tildy, Ferenc Nagy and Béla Kovács, the leaders of the party, were genuine democrats who had no desire to return to the past. Even though they shared with the Hungarian people an almost visceral dislike of Russians, and were skeptical of Soviet intentions, they nevertheless recognized the necessity of cooperating with the occupying power for the foreseeable future.

Earlier I posed the question whether the differences in interpreting the post-war period can be explained by different backgrounds of two historians? I am not a relativist. I really do not believe that all versions of history are equally valid. I could not write if I did not believe that what I was writing was correct and it is the true version of events. I like my book better than I like Borhi's. At the same time there is a different part of me that knows that Borhi is an equally intelligent and equally diligent scholar and he sees matters differently. He is no doubt as convinced of the correctness of his views as I am convinced of the correctness of mine. I simply have to live with that. We just have to live with that great mystery that other people see the world differently. How can they?