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REFLECTIONS ON NATIONAL TRADITION

I

The notion and character of national tradition

Tradition can be called the passing down of collective experience and values from one generation to the next. It is therefore in a constant interaction, at times in harmony, at times in conflict, with progress and development. Ongoing renewal or a bold break can be present in production as well as in society, and especially in culture. Past experience, accumulated and incorporated in tradition, may prove to be indispensable even in the most radical turn of events; although breaking with tradition or even its elimination is emphasized at times, the nascent new gradually reincorporates more and more of the lost tradition. In the first place it takes back of tradition what is in direct harmony with its objectives. Thereafter it pulls back, if indirectly, all that can be put to good use, in one way or another, and finally it strives to recognize tradition as such, as its predecessor.

The ways of employing cultural tradition and man's relationship with tradition are defined by class interests. A social class endeavouring to seize power always stresses the new, and attacks the traditions of the earlier social order, picking out only revolutionary elements closely dovetailing with its own interests.

At a later stage the social class in question aims to broaden its basis in tradition, striving to reach every past cultural value within the sphere of its objectives that can be described as "progressive." After consolidating its power, and making sure that the defeated enemies of the new social order can hardly profit from tradition, the new class is ready to see itself as its residuary legatee.

National tradition can be described as a defined part of universal cultural traditions, a separate segment possessing internal cohesion and laws of its own. In a limited sense national tradition, as a full system, belongs to a specific community or nation alone. Thus national tradition comprises the full historic experience of a national community and is its spiritual and cultural product: historical values live on in constant interaction with the present. The content of tradition is not limited to the exclusive "national" elements of tradition since the values of the given community before its existence as a nation also form an integral part of tradition. In the case of the Hungarians, not only the values of a society that became a nation state in the nineteenth century, and not exclusively the manifestations of the national conscience of former centuries are part of the national treasury of tradition. All that this society has created since its existence, and that is related to the past of Hungarians as an ethnic group, also belongs to the rich pool of tradition. What is more, the country, and the pre-Hungarian values of the nation's present territory (e.g., the Roman relics) are incorporated in traditions as well.

Humanity now lives within a system of national societies. Each must therefore use, as well as it can, its own national traditions as well as the general, common traditions of humanity. This applies to capitalist and socialist nations. However, neither the interpretation nor the concept of tradition are identical in those cases; national traditions differ in bourgeois and in socialist societies.

It would be wrong to think that assertion of class interests is only a matter of selection, i.e., if one believed that certain phenomena belong to the traditions of a bourgeois nation, and others to the socialist

traditions. Both bourgeois and socialist nations, unless they are out to mutilate their own traditions, will sooner or later have to own to the national tradition as a whole. The only difference will appear in conception interpretation, ranking, or other hierarchical order. Saint Stephen, the first Hungarian king, the seventeenth-century poet Zrínyi, and the nineteenth-century poets Vörösmarty and Petöfi were held in high esteem by the bourgeois nation as they are by the socialist. The bourgeoisie generally endeavours to incorporate past deeds or cultural values, though they be unambiguously hostile from their point of view, naturally with appropriate distortions and falsifications. Thus there have been attempts to include the Paris Commune in the bourgeois-nationalist tradition, and to fit García Lorca into the culture of the Franco regime.

Deliberate selection is only timely in the initial, revolutionary period of a new nation. In Hungary the cult of revolutionary tradition became understandably and necessarily exclusive in the period of struggle for power, pushing into background, and at times handling with suspicion, non-revolutionary elements of the invaluable national tradition. After the early power struggle, at the time of national mobilization for the building of socialism, apart from continuing to value revolutionary tradition as the highest—more stress was accorded to the notion of progressive tradition. This meant the extension of a deliberately nurtured tradition, disseminated in public thinking, to every phenomenon that, though non-revolutionary in itself, pointed in the direction of revolution, and in fact prepared for radical change, confronting class exploitation and defending popular interests. Nowadays progressive tradition is too tight a framework, unless it be expanded robbing it of meaning. In the present consolidated socialism, the Hungarian public will have to heed value as such, apart from whether something happens to be progressive or not. There is a

special duty to preserve all of national tradition of great value, turning it into a treasure owned by everybody. Could the murals of medieval churches, or the works of one of the great masters of the language, Cardinal Péter Pázmány, Archbishop of Esztergom, and a champion of the Counter-Reformation, or Prince Pál Eszterházy's works, amongst the greatest of old Hungarian music, be called part of the heritage? Unless the intention was to make fun of progress in a social-political sense, it would be sophistic to try and classify these things of great cultural value as part of the progressive tradition. At the same time, no one could deny that they are part of the Hungarian national tradition, and no efforts should be spared in caring for them. (There is a statue of Cardinal Pázmány in Budapest, Eszterházy's music has been released on records, and the murals have been restored to their original beauty.)

At the present phase of development and most probably for a long time to come, class interests will be present in the notion of the socialist nation not through an elimination of this or that but through proper interpretation and ranking. There is nothing the nation values that the socialist nation could renounce or leave to decay. The socialist interpretation of tradition should differ from the bourgeois way in that the former cares for the values of the past in a more complete manner and with greater responsibility as the working people can be considered the legitimate inheritor of all human and national values. The bourgeoisie, owing to their narrower class interests, was able to recognize the whole stock of the national heritage. It cultivated in the first place and popularized that which separated from or contrasted with other nations. Since a bourgeois nation lives in a web of insoluble problems with other nations, national tradition merely strengthens separation, that is self-defence, or aggressive aspirations as the case may be. But stress is laid on the humanistic values of the national

tradition in a socialist nation advocating the principles of internationalism, and the assessment of those elements that bring the socialist nation closer to other nations, uniting rather than dividing, comes to the forefront of interest.

*The function of national tradition
in current thinking*

Keeping traditions awake is always important for the inner cohesion of a given community. This is so in the case of a family, a village, town, or institution, and applies in a more powerful way to the life of society, that is a nation as a whole. Firmly rooting national traditions in current public thinking strengthens the given community and develops the sense of belonging to that community. This community is socialist Hungarian society. Tending national traditions therefore objectively furthers the cohesion of socialist society, they are a source which simply cannot be neglected but must be exploited and mobilized to the fullest possible extent. One should be made aware that there are a thousand links that tie us to this place, that we belong to this community.

This takes us to the most complex part of the problem since one could easily reach improper, nationalist conclusions. People might argue that national feeling should be strengthened since this pays better than developing socialist ways of thinking. As against this sort of pseudo-interpretation, let us seek that part of self-awareness where the liveliness of national commitment is indispensable for a man of socialist conviction, and where nothing can replace that at the current stage of development.

Our starting-point should be that as a matter of course everyone is born into a family. A child does not try and find another father just because his own buys less candy, or allows more of a rough house. The feeling of belonging to a nation equally

ought to go without saying. We are born into a nation, that is not a matter of choice but something given. Just as it would seem absurd to want to belong to a family that gives one better living conditions, so it would be crazy to make more pay a criterion of belonging to a nation, more precisely, which of the nations ensures one a higher standard of living.

The universal truth, that it is better to live in socialism than in capitalism, cannot be automatically transferred to every individual. There is nothing surprising about someone assuring better living conditions for himself in another country. In this respect, every economically underdeveloped country suffers drawbacks since a more advanced country (more advanced in living standards), like it or not, has a certain attractive power. So let us not cherish the illusions that the citizens of socialist Hungary live and remain here because all of them are better off than anywhere else. That argument turns on those who put it forward the very moment a Hungarian doctor, engineer, scientist, or even skilled worker reaches the recognition that some other country offers him higher rewards for his work, and what is more, he even gets such proposals to such effect. This could happen even if all the economic leeway is made up, and Hungary were competitive with the more advanced countries. Even then, for one reason or another, someone might see better opportunities for himself somewhere else. It would suffice if these people acted indifferently towards the human and moral values and superiority of their country, seeing welfare in material terms alone, and that is unfortunately far from rare, and that would be sufficient reason to break camp and move elsewhere.

In the present age of technological progress, in a mechanical world that necessarily favours material and interest considerations, that kind of attraction can be extremely powerful. Science and technology are rightly and necessarily gaining

ground in human thinking, and they are cosmopolite by nature. Scientific knowledge can on principle be utilized anywhere. That is why the attraction is and remains strong for people to capitalize their knowledge in a country—other than their motherland—where the best financial conditions are assured.

Socialist consciousness alone will not sufficiently withstand such attraction partly because socialist consciousness does not as yet penetrate the whole of the society, and partly because people with socialist ways of thinking can live in other countries, and actually do live in many parts of the world. That is why it is the feeling of belonging to this community, to the nation, the homeland that in all circumstances links, or can link, people to this country. Apart from the native language the national tradition is the strongest bond that retains and even strengthens that feeling.

Naturally one should not go to extremes. In an age when the world turns increasingly international, and contacts between countries speedily develop, a certain degree of migration is just about inevitable. Irrespective of political regimes, the number of people constantly increases who for various reasons settle down in another country for a shorter or longer spell, or for good. For a long time now a large number of Hungarians have settled abroad, and Hungary as well owes much to immigrants. Migration to a certain extent is quite healthy and no kind of national consciousness can ever stop it. But national consciousness helps to make such cases exceptional, and to maintain such people within the ideological and moral ties of the national, though not the social ones.

Consideration should be given to the cultural attractions of greater, more advanced civilizations as well, apart from the materialist aspects. One even unwillingly experiences open or latent longings for Italy, Paris or other temptations of capitalism, or the success of imperialist undermining,

or materialism, or even a yearning for adventure. It is rather a question of a natural cultural magic that has, for understandable reasons, been valid and is still valid today, irrespective of socio-political implications. Nations poorer in cultural traditions can never perfectly counterbalance such an influence; but they can reduce those influences to their own value, if they are aware of their own culture, whatever it may be, and if its values are deeply imbedded in the national tradition.

When I emphasize that love of country, and an awareness of belonging to a nation, that is the keeping alive of national traditions strengthens links with the socialist nation, and particular to non-socialist minded people, that is not a question of tactics. It would be wrong to imagine that national traditions serve to attract to the socialist country men and women and sections of society who are not socialist minded, people backward in their thinking. The national heritage must be as alive a factor for socialists as for anyone. National traditions are at the same time a universal value, a part of universal human culture for which we are responsible and whose nurturing, protection and preservation require no tactics, but a long-term strategy.

Contradictions in the respect accorded to national traditions

Over the past twenty-five years the Hungarian socialist state has not neglected to embrace, cherish and make known the precious traditions of the country's past. On the contrary, one may assert with every justification that more such efforts have been made in the past twenty years than even before. A new hierarchy of traditional values has been established, and the treasures of the past have been uncovered and publicized to an unprecedented degree. A long list of past achievements could be drawn up in the field, starting with the central

position accorded to revolutionary values, the popular and critical editions of the classics of Hungarian literature, research into and publication of long-forgotten relics, the restoration of art monuments, the nurturing and collection of folk culture, and the successful activity of scholarly institution in the study of the Hungarian language, literature, history, leading to synthesis based on scientific standards. Add the widespread popularizing work, the worthy and crowd-pulling celebrations of national anniversaries (Dózsa, the leader of a peasant revolt in 1514, Rákóczi, the poets Petőfi and Ady) and initiatives in particular towns or regions caring for local traditions. Special importance should be attached to the fact that, mainly owing to carefully planned scholarly work, these local celebrations were arranged following well considered ideas, thus proving most effective.

If, despite all this, and particularly in 1973 and 1974 there were anxieties that the bonds of nationhood are loosening and a section of Hungarian society is losing touch with the national past, one must draw the conclusion that work in the field of national tradition has not been quite satisfactory. The reasons must be sought in certain deficiencies and one-sided, contradictory ways of treating national tradition.

In trying to track down those weaknesses, one ought in the first place think of a lack of coordination of basically right trends, and the damage done to each other's achievements. Simultaneously with the fact that we constantly stress the importance of the national values, and do much for them, other primarily important objectives weaken efforts. National traditions are gradually eliminated from the thinking of young people to give more room to the natural sciences and technology.

A practically uninterrupted process goes on right before our eyes. What really happens is that history and literature keep shrinking in the school curriculum to the benefit of the natural sciences. More and

more values are dropped by education and the consciousness of future generations every year. This process not only means that young people will know less and less of the national past that they so badly need to counteract the tempting siren song of the wide world, but also that teachers, mainly those teaching Hungarian literature and history, those mostly responsible for preserving and carrying on tradition, will lose heart, and withdraw from the fray.

It is important for Hungary to work out a long-range research plan concentrating forces on tasks indispensable for the country's present and future, but it is wrong that none of the central long-range plans envisage research into the national tradition (history, literature, language, art, music, ethnography, etc.).

Naturally this does not mean that such research does not get the necessary or possible support support. It is rather a question of efforts as part of the long-range national plan to do something special, timely and important, in addition to what is done anyway as a matter routine. This basically sound objective can unwillingly go hand in hand with lowering the prestige of research into the national tradition, in fact it can provoke its temporary decline. It happens that efforts previously directed to Hungarian literature and history are regrouped and concentrate on tasks figuring in the long-term plans. A scholar working on the poets Csokonai or Petőfi may be led to believe that it would do more good to change direction and examine literary aspects of the contemporary scientific and technological revolution that, as part of the long-term plan, is seen as a more important task than the study of literary classics. The national neglect of older traditions unwillingly qualifies as second-rate all scholars and institutions working in this field, as doing something that is not prescribed, or demanded, but merely tolerated, or perhaps cheerfully accepted. This is a good example to illustrate how a good idea can bring about anomalies of national

studies. Of course all this could be corrected by including the main tasks concerning the national tradition into the national scientific plan. It is hoped this will happen sometime in the future.

The frequent campaigns that become most apparent in the cult of anniversaries, confirm how unsatisfactory the nurturing of traditions is. It is a proper thing to commemorate an anniversary in a way worthy of it, but the nurturing of national treasures must not be turned into an occasional jubilee. The 500th anniversary of the death of the first great Hungarian poet, Janus Pannonius (who wrote in Latin), was honourably celebrated. On that occasion his poems were published in four different volumes and editions. All four were different in content. The only thing sad about them was that the last previous edition of poems by Janus Pannonius had come out in Hungary twenty years earlier, in 1953. It would have looked incomparably better, if all the parties concerned had not come awake at the same time. One of the greatest strengths of tradition is continuity. Traditions should therefore be never linked to anniversaries, only to be put out like flickering flames.

Historiography plays a most essential part in keeping national traditions awake. But Marxist historiography, in its role of forming human consciousness, has not displayed sufficient effectiveness yet. Historians have done much in the past 25 years. At the same time popularization has lagged far behind. This cannot in the least be accounted for by the fact that—for laymen—history has become somewhat less interesting. Actually the latest trends in historiography have rightly and necessarily placed the emphasis on basic subjects of research other than the story of events and the examination of personalities. The recognition of deeper, more concealed laws is undoubtedly a more fundamental task than describing developments. But the teaching of history cannot really follow this trend. Abstract laws are memorized at school instead of interesting,

captivating and edifying incidents, imagination stirring historical conflicts and the stories of great men. It is especially in school that the dehumanizing of history takes on a tremendous scale, with abstract laws moving into the forefront overshadowing man and culture. It is not enough to uncover national tradition and the historic past if the means and methods are lacking to pass the achievements on to the broad masses, presenting them in an acceptable, interesting and attractive manner. Although interesting and successful efforts are made to this end, there is still much to be done and many resources remain untapped. In Hungary, e.g., there is no popular history periodical to present the interesting issues of Hungarian and world history in a colourful, richly illustrated manner thereby generating interest, as is successfully done in other countries.

Short-circuiting the national historical consciousness

When it comes to nurturing national traditions the main and perhaps the gravest irregularity is the shortening in time of public interest in the past. The average Hungarian feels he is the inheritor of a rather short past. In public consciousness Hungarian history will sooner or later be viewed in the light of a mere hundred or hundred and fifty years. Less and less, and practically nothing of the pre-nineteenth-century Hungarian literature will be taught at schools. Older chapters of Hungarian history, taken out of context, will remain senseless and boring. Popularization again regards only the values of the more recent age as worthy of dissemination. For a long time there was a stop in book publishing of pre-nineteenth-century Hungarian literature, and only recently has there been a change for the better.

It is customary to explain the neglect of the past by a lack of interest. But this

argument is misleading as were the 1976 commemorations of the 1526 battle of Mohács. The commemorations on the 450th anniversary proved how false that argument was when books of history became best-sellers overnight. Balassi's or Zrínyi's poems, or *Kuruc* songs, or chronicles, or the Hungarian flower songs are never remaindered. That applies to foreign literature as well. Older classics never gather dust on store-room shelves. The argument that the ancient past has little or nothing to teach today's public is also lame. It is true that the history and literature of the recent past are more directly linked to the present and it is also obvious that nineteenth and twentieth-century Hungarian literature which is unsurpassably richer than older literature, should occupy a much more prominent place in the public consciousness.

It does not follow, however, that older literature and history have no timely lesson to teach.

The point is that it is not immaterial whether a nation has 150 or a thousand years' past. The depth of the past has a special power from the point of view of national cohesion. It is certainly no mere contingency that younger nations are making desperate efforts, even in socialist conditions, to prove and document a long past and established culture. Younger nations—like Canada—are striving to keep in evidence every spot and stone that recalls a notable event. What would they give to have a place where books were written as long ago as 900 years ago? Hungarians tend to cast a nonchalant glance at something as close as the eighteenth century, as if they were ashamed of the distant past—as some sort of feudal or clerical lumber-room—forgetting that thereby one renounces the larger part of history.

Pruning the past starts off a dangerous process. It is wrong to think that there will be keener interest in, e.g., the nineteenth century, if one diverts attention from more distant centuries. Quite the contrary! Cut

off from their roots, the great values of the nineteenth century will appear less interesting. Deprived of their historical antecedents, their significance will not emerge. One should regard great national treasures in a twofold relation, first, in their international content, in order that their real place in universal human culture be clearly seen; it should not be placed neither at the bottom, nor at the top, taking away unjustified places from other works. The other aspect is the domestic national historical perspective. One should clearly point out the road national culture took until it produced a given thing. Just as neglect of the former system of connections leads to provincial shortsightedness, the omission of the latter deprives one of enjoying the magic of the present as opposed to the past.

Renouncing the continuity of tradition

The question of continuity is closely linked to what has been said before. Something that has a long-lasting continuity or is interrupted temporarily, but is reorganized, unwillingly creates confidence and attests to power. There is some sense in business firms stressing their 100 or 150-year-old or even older history. They are well aware that the client will automatically think that if a firm has managed to survive for that long, it must be worth something, and must possess experience that from the start ensures something extra. Cultural and scientific institutions also should insist on continuity. The Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei claims to be 374 years old. Actually, being founded in 1603, it ceased to exist in the 1630s without any fanfare. It was only in 1745 that the first unsuccessful attempts were made to revive the academy. In 1804 the academy was re-established at long last, and has been continuously functioning ever since. It was a matter of course for those striving to revive the academy, that they regarded the new one as the direct successor of the former, that

the latter should consciously be associated with the noble heritage of the former. Alas, similar continuity of tradition, preservation and handing down of certain moral capital to later generations was never frequent or customary in Hungary. Ignoring the past, new creations entailing unnecessary waste of energy have prevailed here. This was practically a historical malady in Hungary. In the Middle Ages, e.g., universities were established in Cracow, Prague, and Vienna, which, despite a number of crises, have survived. In Hungary, however, in the course of a century or more universities were established on four occasions, each time at another place, taking no account of predecessors. Naturally all four had a short life. When, at last, in the eighteenth century, the predecessor of the present university of Budapest, was established in Nagy-szombat it lacked the traditions of the university in nearby Pozsony, which dated back to the time of King Matthias Corvinus (fifteenth century). In discussing this subject one ought to ask whether the students of today's Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest are aware that they are attending a more than 300-year-old institution? That the university's name was changed to *Eötvös Loránd* was justified by the change of structure and profile, but was it right to discretely conceal the role of the founder removing his bust and portrait?

The case of the teachers' training college at Nyíregyháza is an outstanding example of breaking continuity of tradition. The cultural centre of north-eastern Hungary, looking back to several hundreds of years, and progressive without any reservations, was Sárospatak, with its college, library and relics. Since it was run by the Calvinist Church it ceased to exist in its old form in the early 1950s. It soon became clear that this part of the country needed a teachers' training college and one was actually established in the second half of the fifties, in nearby Nyíregyháza. That could be justified by numerous practical and

structural, or other reasons. But in a broader sense it was to be regretted that the new college did not become the direct successor of Sárospatak which looked back to four hundred years of operation. But aside from the power of tradition, a large library would have met intellectual demands at Sárospatak, one which is now hardly used. Meanwhile the new college has to make desperate efforts with other schools to create its own stock of books. There is a fine example of unnecessarily broken traditions, and a typical case of wasted values and resources.

A long list of examples could be drawn up including the often recurring superfluous changes of street names. Naturally the picture is not complete and the negative examples should not be generalized. Lately there have been endeavours on the part of certain schools and institutions to revive their past, and restore a continuity, which was perhaps unnecessarily broken. It is desirable that this trend should strengthen in the future.

II

The strength of the visible past

The visible relics of the past such as art and historical monuments have a special part in keeping awake the instinctive and conscious bonds with the homeland and the past of the nation. Hungarian restoration and preservation authorities have been most active. A huge state subsidy and social support help the work of skilled and devoted experts. Despite these factors, their efforts lag behind those of other countries.

Hungary is relatively poor in art monuments. Within the present boundaries of Hungary most of the architectural relics were destroyed. But it does not follow that it is less worthwhile to allocate money to the restoration of art monuments here—as one could not restore monuments to attract the world—but quite the contrary; the greater losses should stimulate to exert more efforts.

A work of art is not merely a tourist bait, though this is not to be neglected, and there is ample scope in this field which remains unexploited. Monuments of art are one of the most effective means of developing historical consciousness apart from the aesthetic aspects. With Hungarians gradually becoming a nation of car owners, motor tourism is expanding and it could soon be achieved that week-end motorists be given the opportunity to gaze at interesting beautiful relics of the Hungarian past, which radiate a historical atmosphere.

If despite all promising achievements the situation is far from solved, then more than ever, financial means should be made available. In Slovakia not only the more or less safe churches and castles have been largely restored, but also the ramshackle strongholds of Szepes, Trencsén, Beckó, etc. that have played such a great role in Hungarian history: the scientific conditions for part restoration being met, one should therefore be ashamed of the state of the royal castle at Visegrád, though experts boast of outstanding results at the nearby Matthias palace—where work is however proceeding at a snail's pace.

Protection of monuments naturally costs a great deal of money, but it is not always a lack of finance that accounts for the fact that present values are not truly in the public consciousness. In many instances greater care and attention are lacking. Why can't they put up signs on roads to show that there are notable art monuments nearby. Even in France, a country incomparably richer in monuments, every now and then there are signs remindign trippers that "Romanesque Church 3 km from here," or "Renaissance castle nearby." Why can't trippers on their way to Salgótarján be told that one kilometre off the main road they can see a beautifully restored medieval church at Mátraverebély. Or why can't similar signs tell visitors and Hungarians alike on the road to Miskolc of the nearby crypt at Feldebrő, with the oldest wall

paintings in Hungary, etc. But let us stick to Budapest: visitors to the ruins on Margaret Island will hardly think that they are stepping on an unmarked tombstone of King Stephen V of Hungary. That king was not among the greatest of rulers, not even a memorable, but since the sarcophagus of one of the most tyrannical Grand Dukes of Moscow is there among the rest, finely polished, then we should be ready to grant a modest tombstone to a Hungarian king. The crudest fate is set of the country houses. In the post-war years it was only natural to use the abandoned and largely damaged houses of landowners for public purposes since that way most of them were saved—though sometimes their wall paintings were ruined. They were turned into schools, hospitals, alms houses, offices, homes for children, tractor drivers' training schools, etc. In most of the cases such use could only be regarded as temporary since the buildings are hardly fit for the above-mentioned purposes, and if they were altered, then invaluable monuments of art may perish. In other countries, where abandoned houses were used for similar purposes at the outset, hospitals and schools later moved, and the houses were restored to their original beauty to fulfil cultural or scientific purposes. Similar efforts have also been made in Hungary, and there has been some progress like the tractor schools which moved out of Nádasdy House at Sárvár, and the Esterházy Palace of Fertőd has been restored. But still these are lesser results than in neighbouring Slovakia where travellers can view museums or outposts of university or academic institutions in the majority of the country houses. In Hungary, if someone visits the Ráday château at Pécel, that was one of the homes of national literary revival of the late eighteenth century, he will find a hospital there and may have difficulty finding the Rococo frescoes painted by Gedeon Ráday himself. In the vicinity of Budapest, there is the shameful sight of the Grassalkovich château at Gödöllő, one of

the most beautiful Baroque buildings in Hungary, now in a state of decay.

Thus the hitherto achieved sound results in the Hungarian protection of art monuments should be improved on. That is obviously possible only if the issue is raised to government level and a more elaborate and financially better backed programme ensures conditions for faster progress. Educational work also must be stepped up so that society as a whole feel it a common task to protect nurture and make known every monument of art and historic relic in the country. Not only national consciousness and the feeling of being part of the homeland will strengthen but social morality will also benefit. Such an act teaches one to protect values, and to honour the work of forebears. That is badly needed since the protection of art monuments is unfortunately not a Hungarian virtue. The sad fact that relatively many of Hungarian historic monuments were destroyed throughout the ages, is not just due to Turks, Tartars and wars in general. Other nations also suffered wars, the Turks subjugated other nations as well, and yet other nations, not in the least our closest neighbours, were able to save more of the values of their historic past.

Numerous examples could be quoted to illustrate how vivid the instinct to preserve values, and save and keep awake precious traditions and the need of reconstruction after destructions have been in other countries. In the Middle Ages the cities and cathedrals of south-eastern Italy were knocked about by Lombards, Normans, Saracens, Hungarians, Frenchmen, Spaniards. Turks practically every hundred years, they were rebuilt in no time, more beautifully than before. A number of the great medieval Serbian monasteries survived 500 years of Turkish occupation, and at places, aside from the buildings and frescoes, gold and silverware, always easy prey, were saved. Yet there was plenty of ravaging done, but when the tide of war passed, the survivors immediately started erecting roofs over

what remained, touching up the paintings, thereby shielding them from decay. One should mention the Orthodox monastery of Mesic, near Versec in the Bánát in what used to be Hungary. It was completely destroyed by Turks in a fit of senseless rage in 1716. As soon they were expelled three surviving monks and a fourth, Moses Stefanovici, who later joined them, travelled the countryside with a collecting box and within four years they were able to start reconstruction work. When, after 23 years of hard work, in 1745, they ran out of money, the monk travelled as far as Saint Petersburg to the Czarina Elizabeth, the daughter of Peter the Great, and obtained icons, money and liturgical books. The ancient building still stands, though the appearance is Baroque. That is what an Orthodox monk with a beggar's bowl accomplished. The wealthy archbishops of Esztergom, prince primates of Hungary, did not trouble to save their own cathedral built by King Béla III, a pearl of Hungarian Romanesque architecture, though the walls of the burnt-out cathedral still stood after the Turks had been expelled, and the *Kuruc* wars had ended. When, late in the eighteenth century, reconstruction was finally discussed, the walls had collapsed, the carved stones scattered, and the magnificent main portal, the *porta speciosa*, was in pieces. A completely new, artistically uncharacteristic colossus of a building was built instead. The cathedral of Székesfehérvár, for centuries the place where kings of Hungary were crowned and buried, that could have been restored without difficulty after the expulsion of the Turks, met a similar fate. The sepulchral chapel of King Louis the Great was used even in the eighteenth century, but no one cared to maintain it; the sepulchral chapel of King Matthias also survived the dawn of the nineteenth century: it was pulled down in 1800. Is there any need to give more examples? Let me point out instead that the power and vitality of a nation's culture are manifest not only in its capacity to create

something new—luckily there has never been a problem with that—but in its ability to preserve and reconstruct. It would have been better to learn that centuries ago, but it is not too late to do so now.

Not canonization

National tradition, which can be a living source of socialist patriotism, may also be a source of nationalism. Especially if national tradition becomes some sort of holy writ. Tradition ought to be known and well preserved but not canonized. It is a sign of provincial short-sightedness in Hungary when the whole of public opinion winces if a scholar or writer dares to rethink some past event or person possibly pointing out the warts on some national hero, or contradictions in a progressive movement. Only a weak national consciousness will not tolerate criticism. This is obvious to Hungarians as well where other nations are involved. No one in Hungary minds reading about some of the weaknesses in Goethe's character but Petőfi is another story.

Discrepancies in the appreciation of tradition are inevitable. It follows from the spirit of local patriotism that has lately been emerging, and which despite its exaggerations and teething troubles, plays a positive part in the nurturing of national traditions. There is nothing in a town or region giving preference to its own natives. There is not need for everyone to make efforts to get to know, like, and appreciate everything in the national tradition.

The nurturing of national tradition can never be imagined on the strength of a unified central principle or plan. Without local initiatives and activities society and the state would never have the power and the energy to look after every past value. Within reasonable limits space should be given to healthy competition, and to a certain mobility of values.

As I consider tradition as a living force

and not as a collection behind a showcase, reappraisals and criticisms will both happen and are sound in the final analysis. Even if in the heat of a discovery or debate there tend to be overratings or exaggerated criticisms. The more serious initial troubles include overappreciation and sobering criticism, and the accentuation of the shady sides is sometimes really needed. It is a grave mistake to blame the critics of the national tradition, and the discoverers of the dark chapters of the national past for the weakening of national consciousness, as has happened several times in the recent past. What I have in mind here are the critical remarks by Erik Molnár concerning the *kuruc* wars as well as István Nemeskürty's book on the Mohács disaster or *Cold Days* by Tibor Cseres which was filmed by András Kovács. All three tended to be associated in the consciousness of many as parts of a harmful process of deheroization and a tendency to destroy national consciousness. What happened really? Erik Molnár argued against nationalist elements what survived in Marxist historiography, and pointed out the errors of evaluation in telling the story of the early seventeenth-century rebellions. In the process he tended to draw wrong or rigid conclusions, like, e.g., he doubted the existence or even possibility of popular patriotism, but they were soon corrected by other historians. As a sound effect of his work research into anti-Habsburg movements and especially the history of national ideas gathered momentum after being neglected following Hungary's liberation in 1945. The progress made was largely due to Erik Molnár. Is it wrong that one sees this progressive movement with greater realism today, as achievements and limitations, instead of a *kuruc* myth? István Nemeskürty made his name by trying to make people recognize certain forgotten or unsatisfactorily known national values through research into the history of sixteenth-century Hungarian literature. Coming to the Mohács disaster in 1526 he was

shocked and cried out in anger at the powerlessness and irresponsibility of the ruling classes. Is it wrong if readers awaken to the truth that not only the power behind Sultan Soleiman but the wickedness of Hungarian magnates contributed to the catastrophe, and that it is only make-believe to think that the Turks came out of the blue and destroyed a flourishing Hungarian realm. Contemporary writers like Szerémi, Forgács and others knew this, naturally they also were blamed for centuries for being pessimists and showing prejudice. There may be errors, sloppy judgements and subjectivity in Nemeskürty's book—historians must have had reasons to criticize him—but it is permeated with a passion for the Hungarian past, something that he manages to pass on to the reader. Even if it causes many to shudder, it also makes them think and become interested in one of Hungary's greatest tragedies. Is it unnecessary for Hungarians of today to look into the shocking and revealing mirror of *Cold Days* which tells of the 1941 massacre by Hungarian troops of Jews and Serbians. Are the crimes of Hungarian fascism so well known in the public to the postwar generation? Nobody has dared to give a negative answer to these questions. At the same time it was said that writers should have told the story of Hungarian anti-fascism and Hungarian heroism with the same artistic power. That is a real need, for it is just as important as the showing up of crimes. But a similarly powerful representation of the positive side of history not being available is no reason to deplore the fact that one side—though unfortunately the bigger one—of truth has been presented. Indifference towards the past, and not exposing the mistakes and negative aspects, is the bigger trouble. Only he can be proud of the traditions of the nation, who has the courage to face its weaknesses and crimes, like the poets Zrinyi, Kölcsey or Ady.

Criticism, and periodical or continuous re-evaluation of a live national tradition,

that is a concomitant of progress in research, which will prevent the formation of nationalist myths. Such harmful myths are always connected with a one-sided, arbitrary and exclusive emphasis of one part of tradition, certain traditions being declared right and worthy of imitation, and raised to the rank of norm, of laws beyond criticism. Even the absolutization or mystification of the most progressive traditions is basically harmful, not matter whether it is a national tradition of the *kuruc* age or that of the literary folklore in the nineteenth century. Such traditions are always invaluable and invigorating as long as they are seen in their own historical context, with their necessary limitations, as, the imposing, attractive but outdated phenomena of the past. But they become harmful as soon as they are turned into taboos or presented as models worthy of imitation. Just as a national tradition must be honoured, all kinds of national norms should be criticized and rejected. Codification of that sort was, and has always been, typically a bourgeois endeavour: the bourgeois nation has striven at all times to create abstract, timeless national ideals, in order to fight all new phenomena and all that is modern. That is why it is important to keep tradition awake. With its richness and versatility it documents itself the constant existence of progress and change, and the mere knowledge of it hinders the declaration of a segment of tradition as the only salutary phenomenon. In case not only a single age, trade, personality, or attitude is received with acclaim we will not have to be afraid of the fact that the cult of precious traditions pushes us into one-sidedness, or provincial nationalism. It is not justified to overemphasize revolutionary tradition in a one-sided manner, to the detriment of everything else. It should be honoured as the greatest tradition of history, a tradition moving society onwards with the greatest power, and should be regarded as a necessarily exceptional peak.

Mythicizing a tradition is related to the question of the national character. Certain characteristics—hard to define for the most part—have developed in every nation following as a result of the racial, historical, and social factors that go to make it up. One important factor is language that determines to a certain extent the thinking mechanism of those speaking it. History, and the characteristic social structure of the nation, and other factors develop certain spiritual and mental features that become manifest mostly in the collective experience of national development, in national traditions. The recognizable, tangible national character is a constantly changing, developing capacity where continuity is essential as well as the growth of new elements and the slow fading of certain older ones. It follows that the national character has no permanent model; every attempt aiming to codify it, thereby defining its eternal traits, is nothing but a false myth. National culture, literature, and art are not advanced by those who, looking backward, strive to imitate past national features, but by those who enrich national culture with bold new solutions and expand the national character with new elements. In order to avoid a temporary, provisional break in national continuity, national tradition should become part of every creative mind just as language is. Those who are part of a tradition must boldly strive to go beyond it.

*National one-sidedness, its dangers
and antidote*

The question may arise whether the nurturing of national tradition, the emphasis on its importance, and efforts to make it widely known do not entail the danger of isolation, and are not in contradiction with the internationalist objective of closing the gap among nations, and reducing still existing differences. In many instances a fear of such dangers holds some people back from

supporting a national tradition, and may lead to a suspicion of nationalism just for their initiative in awakening the national past. Yet the cultivation of national history and culture are never nationalism. They can, however, lead to nationalism if they go hand in hand with ignoring or disregarding the values of other nations. Therefore the nurturing of national traditions should be inseparable from making public the great universal traditions of mankind. The narrow and more extensive aspects of the heritage should be present in public thinking in close interaction.

The exclusive assertion of national traditions and the neglect of other nations' cultural values suggest a completely false perspective. If one does not see the place Hungarian values occupy in international life, then one tends to develop an unjustified feeling of national superiority. On many occasions it is only ignorance or stupidity that make one say of some cultural or literary fact that it is unique, exclusively Hungarian, unsurpassed in value throughout the world. Care should be taken in the use of superlatives. We should respect our national values not for their size, but because they are ours, and belong to us. We ought to be glad of them even though aware that other nations have produced something better in the same category.

The possibilities and danger of misjudgment are not one-way ones. There is an inclination to overemphasize the smallness of the country and nation compared with others possessing a greater and richer cultural heritage. Seeing the wealth of Italian art and French literature, we tend to dwarf our relics to the extent of leaving them to gather dust on the shelf. People making such comparisons are especially inclined to regard very few products of Hungarian culture as worthy of respect and support. There is also another extreme attitude, an illusion cherished by many Hungarians of absolute superiority compared with the other nations of Eastern Europe. Despite all

efforts the knowledge of the neighbouring countries is still at a very low ebb in Hungary. Hungarians do not know enough of their neighbours to realize that Croats, Czechs, Serbians, and Rumanians also look back on a past of a thousand or close to a thousand years and great cultural wealth. Most Hungarians think that Russian culture began at the earliest with Peter the Great, what was before him being nothing but barbaric backwardness. Some kind of incomprehensible aversion to publishing books on the cultural heritage of the neighbouring nations, especially Slavs, prevails in Hungary. A well-written book by Professor Likhachev, an honorary member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, on the cultural life of Russia in the age of the Renaissance appeared only after long delays and when Helikon made a beautiful book of the autobiography of the Archpriest Avvakum, a masterpiece of old Russian literature, a critic in one of the dailies noted that it was a waste of energy. Where are the Hungarian editions of the great Croat Renaissance literature, or books on the wall paintings of the Moldavian monasteries? And when will Hungarian book publishing undertake to publish translations of the masterpieces of Polish literature? There is a real need to increase work on the Hungarian national traditions, but one should also see to it that the public acknowledges and properly appreciates the culture of the neighbouring nations, which at times surpasses what this country has produced.

There is a particular need to do that in the case of those who shared a country with Hungarians for many centuries, whose national traditions are in many cases those of Hungarians as well. Miklós Zrínyi (1508–1566), who defended the castle of Szigetvár, is a national hero for Hungarians and Croats alike. The historic epic *Szigeti Veszedelem* (Menace of Sziget, 1646) by his great-grandson, also Miklós Zrínyi, is considered a classic by Hungarians and Croats alike. And what should one say about Péter

Beniczky (1606–1664), who wrote verse in Hungarian and Slovak, János Kájoni (1629–1687), who called himself Valachus but wrote his songs in Hungarian, or the Slovak-speaking Jan Jesensky calling himself a “nobilis Hungarus” and yet he died a martyr’s death for Czech freedom? As part of Hungarian national traditions we respect a number of writers, artists, historical personalities, or artistic relics that are also claimed by other nations. If one considers these facts, then the most delicate of the Hungarian national tradition, the memory of old Hungary, and the cause of the former Hungarian territories and the Hungarian minorities living there will have less touchy difficulties for us.

The basis of the argument cannot be anything but strict historic reality and facts. We have absolutely no reason to be bashfully silent about the existence of the Hungary of the past or of the presence of Hungarians in neighbouring countries, not exceptionally as newcomers, but as natives of those territories in the majority of the cases. But we should also bear in mind that the Hungary of yore was the territory on which several nations lived right from the start, and the cultural heritage or numerous manifestations of it, of that area belong to them as well in many cases. One-sided appropriations of common traditions and common values—on the part of anybody—are self-deceptive manoeuvres that sooner or later react on themselves.

The vividness, increased respect and nurturing of the Hungarian national tradition cannot entail any kind of nationalism, and does not oppose internationalist objectives. Against the latter—with regard to traditions—one only offends if one displays indifference towards the culture of other nations. The salutary part of a national tradition strengthening national consciousness should go hand in hand with the effect of universal culture exemplifying interdependence and respect for each other on the part of the nations.