

# SPECTATOR'S JOURNAL

## HUNGARY'S OLD CERTAINTIES

by William McGurn

*In their own countries, in the so-called Free World, how often have they used tanks against the working people and the unemployed, tear gas, weapons, bludgeons, hundreds and thousands of policemen, gendarmes, and soldiers against those who only ask for more bread? You can't open a single capitalist picture magazine without being confronted with sensational photos of such incidents. What wouldn't the Voice of America give to be able to cite just one example of tanks being used against the masses in a Socialist country, one example where it had been necessary to use tanks and arms the way it occurs every day in countries of the so-called Free World. . . .*

—Hungarian Premier Mátyás Rákosi  
February 29, 1952

### Budapest

Is irony possible apart from history? We smile at the handsome groom waiting by the altar for his bride because we remember the little boy who announced that he hated girls. Today, thirty years to the month after Hungary's 1956 revolution, we smile at Comrade Rákosi's similarly misplaced self-confidence. Whatever Hungary's Party hacks might have believed about history's being determined in their favor, when the crunch came they put aside the dialectic for those more traditional tanks.

Even more of an irony, the apparatchik whom the Russians installed in Budapest to prevent any further unseemly attempts by the workers to lose their chains, János Kádár, is today hailed by the West as a "liberal." Presumably he merits this description for allowing such things as *Time* and *Newsweek* to enter his domain. Yet Ronald Reagan tolerates all these things and more and still no scribe dares refer to him as a liberal. And the President does not have Russian troops on his soil. Of course, the word is used relatively, but that gets back to the nub: Are there no certainties even in our vocabulary? Do we no longer have any common principles by which we may make political assessments?

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A recent visit here suggests that Mr. Kádár's liberalism might not hold up under such a test. The first sign was not long in coming. At Budapest's Ferihegy Airport customs officer 0702 squealed with delight upon discovering two books—Jozsef Cardinal Mindszenty's *Memoirs* and Melvin J. Lasky's *The Hungarian Revolution*—in my luggage. Prior to my visit, assurances had been given that anything except pornography was okay, but officer 0702 evidently hadn't been told. After a bit of nastiness over my refusal to sign a document I couldn't read, I signed a form acknowledging in English that two books had been confiscated.

The Hilton Hotel on Buda's Castle Hill compensated for much of the initial unpleasantness: set high above the Danube next to the church where Hungarian kings have been crowned, the Hilton is a triumph of modern architecture (not to mention of Western funding), incorporating the ruins of a thirteenth-century Dominican monastery and a fifteenth-century Jesuit college. Indeed, the Hilton is but a symptom of an East European-wide phenomenon of Communist rulers turning their countries into vast living museums, in an endless pursuit of the legitimacy they will never have. This reverses their initial efforts to root out, brutally if it came to that, all those aspects of their societies that did not fit into the master plan; Cardinal Mindszenty did not spend fifteen years holed up in the American embassy for nothing. It was only when the future turned out to have a few bugs in it that the government started to focus on the glories of the past.

The upshot is an incessant effort on the part of these regimes to co-opt the better parts of their own societies. In Warsaw the authorities have spent huge sums to rebuild the Old City exactly as it was before being destroyed in World War II; in East Berlin they have even resurrected an old statue of Prussia's Frederick the Great on the Unter den Linden. In Budapest the painstakingly literal restoration of the entire Castle Hill area, including the Royal Palace, has restored what is perhaps Europe's most beautiful skyline. For a

people who profess to be on the side of history the regime's leaders are a bit eager to ensure that they are its only interpreters. Even the Crown of St. Stephen—which Jimmy Carter gave back in 1978—is exhibited with somber reverence, a curious collectivist genuflection before the imperial regalia of a nationalist saint/king.

Not all the city is as wonderful as life in the Hilton, of course. A descent down the hills of Buda and over the chain bridge into Pest is evidence enough of that. Primarily it reveals a city composed of handsome old buildings in various states of disrepair. Further inspection of the city's little byways confirmed an early suspicion: the more one moved away from the tourist areas and attractions the stronger the odor of decay. The dominant impression is of a militant shabbiness, rather what London would look like if Labour were ever to get back into office.

Thirty years after the revolution and this shabbiness is hailed as an achievement (relatively speaking, it is). More to the point, thirty years after the revolution and the very word is still taboo; no books, research, plays, films, or poems may be published on the subject. For Hungarian authorities today are as bewildered on the issue as Prime Minister Andras Hegedus was that October 23 when he peered out his office window and thought to himself: "The people are coming!" Ten days later he put his name to the document that called in the Soviet troops. Now he has published his memoirs (in the West) and talks to reporters. Meanwhile, in Section 301 of Pest Lorinc cemetery, those who were hanged for their participation in the rebellion lie buried, their graves unmarked and untended. Here too somewhere lies Imre Nagy, the prime minister who declared Hungary's neutrality just days before the Russian tanks rolled in.

Section 301 is a far corner of this cemetery, and, as with the problems of Hungary at large, it is not hard for the determined optimist to overlook it. In part this explains the attraction Hungary still has to foreign intellectuals. There is first the pull of socialism itself; prices here are dirt cheap and no one

appears to be starving. No use explaining to the Westerner that prices mean something completely different on a Hungarian wage, or even that the problem is not price but supply. Nor is it of use to point out that the decent-enough suit on that fellow's back is probably the fellow's only one. In his brain the Westerner knows all these things. But in a confirmation of Pascal's observation his heart reasons that, well, the man doesn't really need another suit. Such a small price to pay for socialism, nothing horrid like the Gulag.

Just how far the determination to see the bright side of Hungary can go—Communism with a capitalist face—was vividly illustrated by *Time* magazine in its recent glossy cover story on the one-time "butcher of Budapest," the "beloved" Mr. Kádár. It was the Hungarian leader's first interview with an American news organization in more than two decades, and the *Time* editors say they were impressed. They must have been, because the Kádár that emerges from their portrait is a warm, sensitive soul, a veritable man of the

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people. "If free elections were held tomorrow," gushes *Time*, "the 74-year-old Kádár would win by virtual acclamation." Of course, nasty little things like his executions and imprisonments are mentioned, but this sour note lies buried in the text, hidden to all but the most attentive reader—much as the bodies of General Secretary Kádár's victims lie hidden in Section 301.

Far more telling than the appeal of "goulash Communism" are its ancillary, aesthetic considerations. Say what you will, socialism puts a brake on the capitalist dynamo of change that makes so many uncomfortable. Whereas even Paris's Champs Elysées now boasts a monstrous glittering Burger King, Hungary retains the (faded) dignity of the late nineteenth century. True, it does have its own fast food chain, City Burger, whose dubious offerings are apparently enough to

appease the public taste for such things. But they are few and low-key. No golden arches here.

Even religion has been made palatable, once the government decided a little opium might be just the thing for a discontented populace. During my brief stay a black flag was hung from Matthias Church to signify the death of the cardinal-primate who succeeded Mindszenty, Laszlo Lekai. In sharp contrast to the defiance of Mindszenty and the crafty maneuverings of the Polish Church, the Hungarian Church under Cardinal Lekai was compromised and stripped of its animating spirit. So today there is no need for distasteful persecution of the hierarchy, because it has been given the perfect status for intellectuals: ceremony without substance, like the pomp surrounding Sarah Ferguson's wedding to Prince Andrew.

Finally there is the appeal of the people themselves. In a totalitarian society even the innocent cannot avoid acquiring a revolutionary consciousness. Ordinary observations about day-to-day life are fraught with political significance. No wonder academics find it so enchanting; it makes the entire country into a campus. Even the attitude of the rulers toward their charges smacks of the paternalism of the university motto, *in loco parentis*.

So placid is present-day Hungary that the gradual-reform-through-trade theory is undeniably tempting. Far from the recalcitrant oppressed who in 1956 tore down the gigantic statue of Joseph Stalin on Heroes Square and dragged it through the streets of Pest, today's Hungarians are freer and more prosperous than most of their Eastern-

bloc neighbors. In the Budapest Hilton, there is even a casino (foreign currency only, of course), blackjack tables set up in the stone tower of the old Dominican abbey. Although the brochures depict sultry Hungarian maidens, most of those in attendance the Saturday evening I entered appeared to be middle-aged German men, losing quite a lot of money. For my part, I managed to walk away with 175 Deutsche marks on a token bet.

Definitely not the Gulag image. Yet for all the talk about the withering away of Marxist rule, East European Party leaders have proved themselves remarkably resilient. Largely this is because people everywhere, including Marxists, return to the old certainties in times of crisis. In 1956 this meant Russian troops. Today on the anniversary of that revolution, the old certainties still remain—all 70,000 of them. □

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## THE TALKIES

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### A GREAT WALL

by Bruce Bawer

As its title suggests, *A Great Wall* is a study in barriers—specifically, the cultural barriers between two branches of a family. One branch consists of a highly successful San Francisco computer exec, Leo Fang (played by the film's director and co-writer, Peter Wang), his wife Grace (Sharon Iwai), and their college-age son Paul (Kelvin Han Yee); the other consists of Leo's sister (Shen Guanglan) in Peking, her husband Chao (Hu Xiaoguang), a retired government official, and their teenage daughter Lili (Li Qinqin). The episodic story concerns a summer vacation during which the Fangs visit the Chaos in Peking (where most of the film was actually shot, with real Red Chinese actors playing the natives). During their time together, the two families observe, bewilder, amuse, and learn from each other, and eventually part to resume their separate (but somewhat altered) lives in their different worlds.

In a way, the film's title is misleading; for to compare the cultural barriers between the Fangs and Chaos to the

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Great Wall of China is, I think, to prepare the viewer for a somewhat more pessimistic film than Wang (along with co-screenwriter Shirley Sun) has created. This is, indeed, a film not of prodigious divisions or colossal confrontations between cultures but of fine distinctions between two families' attitudes, customs, and standards of living. To be sure, there is the occasional mild animadversion. When Leo tells his sister, for example, that he has quit his position after a disagreement with his boss (he believes he was refused a promotion because he's a "China-man"), the sister insists he has acted unwisely: "Never disagree with your leader." Paul's high-fashion American togs likewise provoke reproach from his Chinese kin: the boy's Calvin Klein trousers look to Chao like "work pants," his expensive jacket like a piece of "burlap sacking with patches."

Politics are never explicitly mentioned. That the Chao family is living under Communism is not so much of an issue here as one might expect, and in fact we are reminded of this circumstance only occasionally, and with Oriental indirectness. For example, when Lili bicycles past the Great Hall of the People, we briefly see the por-

traits of Marx, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao; when Leo and his sister visit their father's shabby grave, Mrs. Chao refers obliquely to the Cultural Revolution: "Father passed away the year the chaos began. We couldn't give him a proper burial." And when a handsome boy named Liu (charismatically played by one Wang Xio) falls for Lili, he attempts (in one of the film's more charming sequences) to woo her by reciting the Gettysburg Address in a fractured but exuberant English.

The latter sort of sequence—a simple, realistic vignette that is plainly and lovingly observed—is the sort at which Wang excels. The film's strength, accordingly, resides largely in its convincing glimpses of the Chinese way of life. Wang takes us into a variety of settings: Lili's English class; a public bathhouse and a school for fashion models, both of which Liu visits in search of work; a gym where children, ranged in military rows, practice their ping-pong serves; a community center where old folks and youngsters alike sit glued to a TV screen, watching an opera performance; a small auditorium where a woman warbles a traditional Chinese

melody about the Han Dynasty. Interesting touches abound. There is a view of the Chinese class system in operation—the principal obstacle to the romance between Lili (daughter of a retired Party man) and Liu (who lives in a "junkyard" with his scholar father) seems to be that they are from different social levels. And Wang devotes plenty of attention to the Chinese young people's preoccupation with things Western, especially American: They sing American popular songs and Italian arias; they drink Coke, though the taste makes them grimace; and they attend nightclubs where the dance music consists of extremely lame disco versions of "Oh Susannah" and "The Merry Widow Waltz." Some of the young Chinese even behave like Americans. When, near the beginning of the movie, Liu and his friend Yu greet Lili and her friend Jan in the street, Lili is surprised at Jan's encouragement of their fresh advances. "Why are you saying hi to strangers?" she berates Jan. "You're no American."

Despite this rebuke, however, it is Lili, more than anyone else, whose head is turned by her American relatives. Under the influence of her cousin Paul, she chides her mother for open-