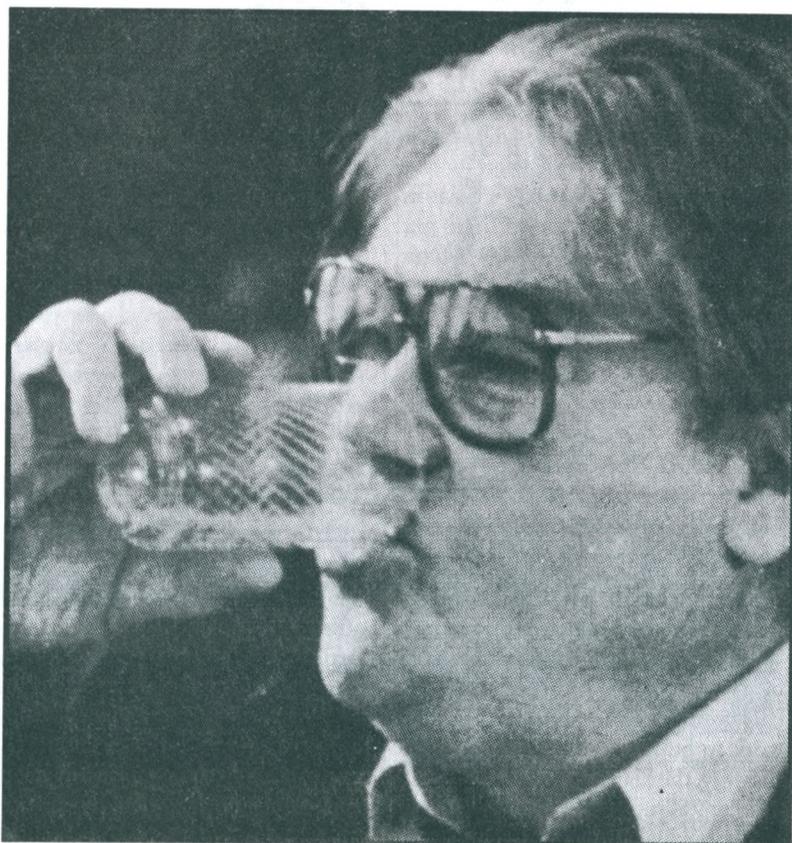


BUDA'S PEST

On a cloudless day, the Danube meanders beneath Budapest's graceful bridges, at one with the onion-domed churches and crumbling castles on either bank.



Amid the rich scenery the grey eyesore known as the White House, formerly the head quarters of Hungary's ruling communist party, stands out all the more conspicuously. Since the 1990 elections the tasteless monstrosity has served as the home of Hungary's democratically-chosen parliamentarians. Among its new residents is the radical nationalist Istvan Csurka, one of Hungary's most renowned playwrights and today the powerful vice-president of the ruling rightwing Hungarian Democratic Forum (HDF). The irony of occupying the communists' old fortress is hardly lost on the satirist Csurka. For Csurka, communism, like the White House, is an historical blemish, a foreign-imposed interruption of the glorious history of the Magyar nation.

The outspoken playwright heads the largest and most reactionary wing of the governing party, Democratic Forum—the *nepi nemzeti*, or nationpopulist, faction. At the time of the 1990 elections the HDF also boasted equally important national-liberal and Christian democratic currents in its ranks. Yet over the past three years the national populists have all but drowned out the party's moderate voices. Though he is no newcomer to controversy, in recent weeks Csurka's rhetorical excesses have come under exceptionally heavy fire, not least from centrists in his own party.

In his drab office in the White House, the 60-year old writer-turned-politician Csurka dwarfs all that is around him. Everything about the man is in giant proportions—his thick

hands, his drooping jowls, his lion-sized head. Stooped over his toy-like plastic typewriter, his deep, heavy breathing fills the air.

The contemporary *nepi nemzeti* movement is the modern incarnation of interwar *nepi* writers' tradition, Csurka explains in his slow, steady monotone. Csurka sees himself as one of the heirs of the folk movement that included the names of some of Hungary's most talented authors and poets. During the 20s and 30s the *nepi* writers extolled the noble simplicity of Hungarian peasant life, lashing out against the corrupting effects of modernisation. They argued that 'foreign' and 'alien' forces—most notably Jews and Germans—stood behind the country's spiritual devastation, just as they had orchestrated its post 1918 dismemberment.

"At the time of the original *nepi* movement over half of all Hungarians lived in the country," he frowns, removing his brown plastic glasses to wipe perspiration from his forehead. "Today it's only a fraction of that—twelve percent—but we've kept the popular ethos of the movement. Now that movement includes all of society," he explains. "That's why we refer to ourselves as *nepi* (folkish) and *nemzeti* (national).

From his window Csurka peers disinterestedly across the Danube. He has become accustomed to "American and Israeli journalists" who "just don't understand" the unique Magyar affinity to *nepi* traditions. "If the West is so concerned about our lack of democratic traditions then it should be so sincerely, out of sorrow, since the roots of the Hungarian nation's predicament lie in Yalta and Potsdam. We aren't in this difficult position today because Hungarians wouldn't choose democracy," he explains, pointing out that in 1945 democratic parties took 60% of the vote in free elections.

"The liberal opposition," he grumbles, "thinks that we have to learn everything from the West. But, because of communism, now we have to relocate our national values and rejoin Europe simultaneously. That's Hungary's dilemma."

Csurka embarked upon his highly-acclaimed literary career after participating in the 1956 revolution. His

witty short stories and plays subtly exposed the tragedy of the suppressed uprising for Hungarian society. But the anti-communism of Csurka and his national cronies was never comparable to the dissidence of the democratic opposition, the handful of critical intellectuals who suffered the regime's persecution. Csurka's works played in Budapest's top theatres and he was twice awarded the official Jozsef Attila prize for literature. During the 70s and 80s, the *nepi* intelligentsia cultivated a comfortable *modus vivendi* with populist forces in the communist party, bartering their collaboration for various concessions.

Now, as during the dictatorship, the nationalists' foremost concern is the significant Hungarian minorities in neighbouring Romania, Slovakia and Serbia. "The reality of Hungary's dismemberment is something that in practice I do accept," he claims, referring to the 1920 Trianon peace treaty's division of Habsburg Hungary. "But in my soul, this is something that I will never accept."

From his writings it is clear that Csurka still harbours very real hopes of Hungary regaining its "lost territories". "In a climate of changing borders, or decades-old injustices being redressed, Trianon should be negotiated too," he writes in the *nepi nemzeti* weekly, *Magyar Forum*. "There must be quarrels, fights, and local wars, and in the end there will be a big negotiation. This isn't merely a custom in Europe," he speculates, "this may well even be a biological rule."

Since his rise to power, a thinly-veiled anti-Semitism has permeated Csurka's prolific writings and addresses. Nearly every week, Csurka's crude diatribes question the ethnic loyalty of certain "dwarfish minorities", "alien elements" or "cosmopolitan liberals" to the Hungarian nation. The barbs, as every Hungarian well knows, insinuate that Jewish members of the democratic opposition parties are somehow less than fully Hungarian.

Until this summer, Csurka's racist slurs and Greater Hungary posturing went unprotested in his own party. But he went a step too far in late August when he called for a spring-cleaning of moderate elements within the HDF itself. For the first time, HDF centrists

condemned Csurka's excesses, letting it be known that they would quit the party should Csurka take over as party chairman.

Liberal critics in the opposition charge that the entire *nepi nemzeti* philosophy is glaringly out of place in contemporary Europe. Its authoritarian leanings, and emphasis on family, nation and religion, represent a brand of conservatism markedly to the right of Western Europe. Rather than looking to the future, democrats claim, Csurka and the HDF aspire to return Hungary to the past. Playwright Istvan Eörsi, a left-liberal, asserts that even Csurka's claim to the mantle of the original interwar *nepi* movement is unjustified. "After 1945 the communists fulfilled most of the *nepi* writers' social demands, such as land reform," says Eörsi. "All that's left now is a romantic yearning for some mythical Hungarian way of life. Now all you see is the *nepi* movement's dark underside—racism, revanchism and anti-Semitism."

In the political arena, Csurka has personally led the HDF's all-out drive to control the media. "We need to get a hold of the media because there the fate of the Hungarian nation will be decided," he says. At demonstrations (well-attended by local skinheads), Csurka bellows that the HDF must "take a whip" to a liberal media that fills the public's head with "marxism". It must "dismiss—if necessary, by police force—the directors and their entourage".

For most Hungarians' taste, the air waves are already egregiously overloaded with religious shows, folk music specials and endless documentaries about the Hungarian minorities. Polls show the popularity of both Csurka and the HDF at all-time lows.

The current strife in the ruling party could well split it in two. Whatever the shape of a realignment, however, the *nepi nemzeti* Right is certain to persist in one form or another. Where the Hungarian nation is at stake, Istvan Csurka and his cohorts will fight to the very bitter end. As they do, they will take at least a piece of Hungarian democracy down with them. ■

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