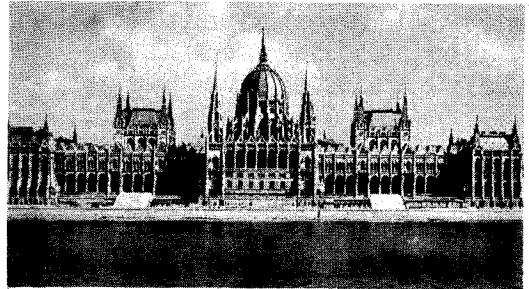


INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

AS-6
A Week in Budapest

Bircaninova 28b
Belgrade, Yugoslavia
December 15, 1962

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue, New York 17, N.Y.



Budapest: Parliament

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Hungary begins before one crosses the border of the Magyar People's Republic. Driving northward from Belgrade through the historic Backa territory -- long part of Hungary, now part of the Vojvodina autonomous province of Yugoslavia -- one sees fewer and fewer signs in the Cyrillic alphabet, more and more in the Latin script and soon in the language of the Magyars. It is, for us, an impenetrable tongue, neither German, Slavic nor Romance. It is, in fact, outside the Indo-European family, part of the Finno-Ugric branch of the Ural-Altai group -- cousin to Finnish, Turkic, Mongolian. It seems to us full of sibilants (s, sz, z, cs, cz) and pursed-lip vowels (ö, u, ü).

Subotica, the last major town on the Yugoslav side of the border, is still largely Magyar in population. It has the row houses and rococo public buildings one is soon to see in Szeged, on the other side. In Subotica, as in long-Italian Istria, the signs in Serbo-Croatian, comfortable enough in Belgrade or Zagreb, seem all too new, not quite in place -- acts of will not yet sanctified by generations of community life.

Have we awakened the border guards? It is past noon, yet the slow pace and elaborate courtesies shown at both the Yugoslav (ten minutes) and Hungarian (twenty) frontier posts indicate that even on a Monday, with a party congress starting in Budapest, the border traffic is anything but brisk. While waiting, we see one other car bound for Hungary, two in the opposite direction. For the Hungarians, we report all currency, radios, cameras, typewriters; they search the trunk for good measure.

The road to Budapest: In times past, it was the main road from Belgrade to Vienna as well, a link in the longer road from Istanbul (via Adrianople and Sofia) to the West. Here it is flat, broad, straight, a road through the open plains between the Tisza and the Danube, finally joining the Danube and following its banks. It is easy to imagine Prince Eugene's cavalry on this road against the Turks -- even easier to visualize Panzer divisions. Now the road seems deserted. One can go ten, fifteen minutes before seeing any traffic, and then it is likely to be a bus or peasant wagon.

The road blends with the countryside -- bleak in November and, to the casual eye at least, quite depopulated. This is the Alföld, traditionally the richest of Hungary's lands, the "Iowa" of Central Europe. Yet on the road itself, only a few bicyclists; in the peasant houses alongside, no sign of life; in the villages, little of that

huddling around cafes and squares that is usual in Yugoslavia. In the towns, one sees old women and boys walking in the mud, a few police, everyone else apparently elsewhere. Some of the buildings are stolidly impressive. Most seem to date from the Hapsburg era, and many are, or were, painted in the then-favored Kaisergelb, Imperial gold. Yet they look washed out, neglected even in comparison with Yugoslav houses, which themselves seem so lackluster when one crosses from Italy. Maintenance has never been one of Communism's strong points.

One muses on the way about the mystery of Hungary's history -- how for a thousand years these Magyars, who have never numbered more than ten million, managed to survive in a sea of Slavs and Germans, and against the onslaught of Mongols and Turks. In Hungary itself before 1918, the Magyars were outnumbered by the "minorities" -- Croats, Slovaks, Jews, Rumanians, etc. The Magyars not only resisted absorption by these peoples but dominated them -- and might still if not for the defeat of 1918. (Magyar-ruled Slovaks and Croats were less eager than Czechs and Serbs to form the ethnic Succession States.)

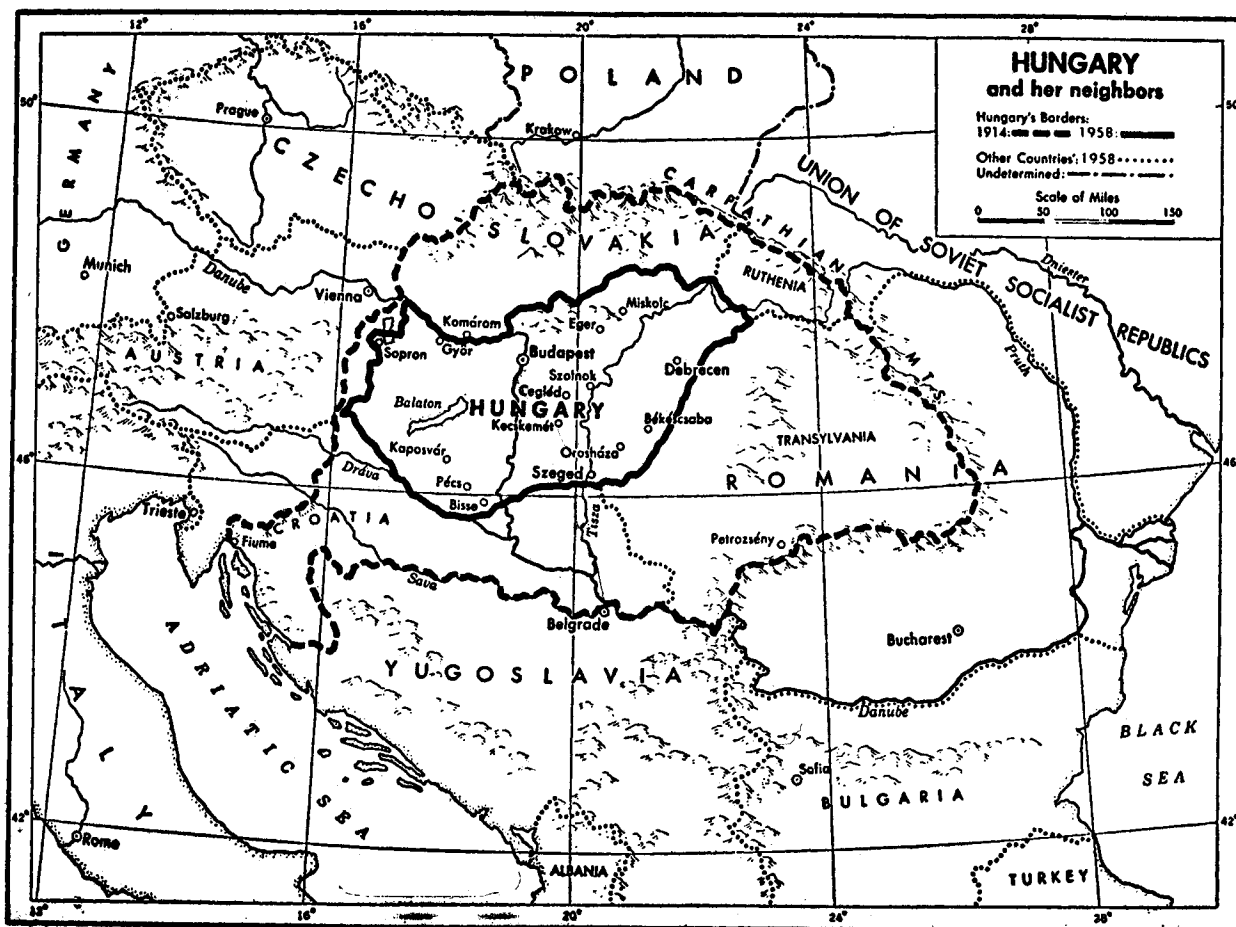
The millennial persistence of the Magyars is often ascribed to the warrior origins and consequent tenacity of their historic upper class. This feudal landed aristocracy managed to preserve until 1945 powers which its Western counterparts had ceded more than a century earlier. A unique phenomenon, surely, these Esterhazys and Andrassys; we owe to them, inter alia, some of the finest music of Haydn.

Yet this great aristocracy is now no more -- finished politically as a class, even more so than the Junkers of eastern Germany. Ironically, the great estates survive, after two intervals of free peasant tenure (1945-49 and 1956-59), as Communist "cooperative farms." Managerial talent being scarce everywhere, often they have the same taskmasters, using (according to the Communist press) the same "immissable" methods.

Finished, too, as an important influence are the Jews -- nearly a million in pre-1918 Hungary, some 400,000 in the truncated state delimited by the Treaty of Trianon. In the days of Hungary's greatest development, between the Ausgleich or compromise of 1867 which established the Dual Monarchy and the war which ended it, the Jews assumed the essential role of a middle, industrial and commercial class which the traditional Magyar lord-peasant structure could not itself create. Some 220,000 of the 400,000 were murdered by the Nazis; tens of thousands of others escaped after the war to Israel or the West. Even the group of deracinated Jews who provided the interwar and postwar Communist movement with many leaders is now powerless. The most prominent politically, Matyas Rakosi and Erno Gerö, were overthrown in the 1956 revolution and have now been made official scapegoats; while on the other hand such intellectuals as Gyula Hay are among the unreconstructed rebels.

Even the Gypsies, who were to Hungarian music what the Negroes are to American, are mostly gone, victims also of Nazi genocide. The music lives on, in Liszt and Bartok as well as cafe melodists, but the musicians perforce are Magyars.

So, old as it looks, it is in many ways a "new" Hungary, cut off from its traditional leavening classes as it is from its traditi-

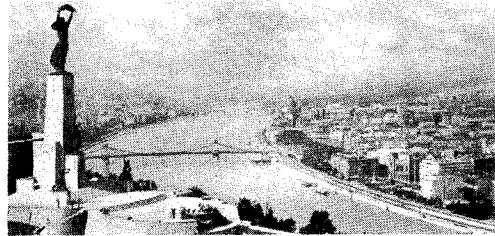


onal connections with Vienna and Zagreb. Twice "new," in fact, for the 1956 upheaval not only sent some 100,000 refugees streaming out of the country but politically disfranchised hundreds, perhaps thousands of the former power elite -- some as notorious Stalinists, others as revolutionaries or patriots.

What remains -- the Communist regime of Janos Kadar -- is something of a paradox. Kadar was jailed under Rakosi and was considered one of the "anti-Stalinist" and "national" faction of the party during the first ten months of 1956. Yet he was installed in power by the Soviet Army at the very moment when Molotov, Malenkov and the "group" were temporarily gaining the upper hand in the Kremlin. Even after the defeat of the "group" in Russia (July 1957), Kadar's regime was an uneasy coalition of erstwhile "liberals" and unregenerate Stalinists. Yet in the last few years the latter have gradually been eliminated, at least from the uppermost levels of the apparatus. And for some time now this product of most flagrant Soviet repression has been ranked among the most "liberal" of Communist regimes -- in sharp contrast to neighboring Czechoslovakia. Some of the rebel writers (Tibor Dery, Laszlo Nemeth) have been publishing again; economic plans have been consumer-oriented and capable of fulfillment without strain; the government has begun to promote tourism.

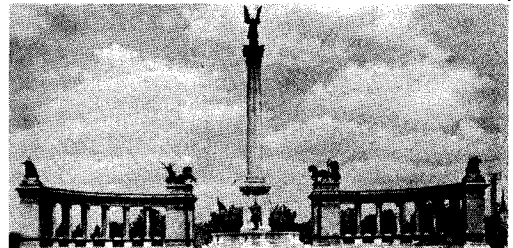
The mind immediately turns to a historical analogy: the period between the defeat of Kossuth's revolution in 1849 and the making of the Ausgleich by Ferenc Deak. Yet Kadar seems no second Deak: try as he may, the taint of Soviet occupation is on him still. Just a few days before we set out, Greville Wynne, a British businessman, was abducted in Budapest by Russian secret police; by all accounts, the Hungarian authorities were at first surprised, then profoundly embarrassed by the episode. Besides, it seems far too early politically for a latter-day Ausgleich. Deak had to await a series of Hapsburg defeats: Solferino (1859), Sadowa (1866)....

Budapest at last. We enter it from the south on the eastern, or Pest, side of the river, through industrial suburbs dense, even in the heavy rain, with coal fumes. Railroad coaches, freight cars, trolleys in tandem, electric power lines, smokestacks; factories, warehouses, shops and houses of all sizes, brick, stone, wood -- in short, a great industrial city. And more than industrial: from a rise suddenly one sees the river, the stately bridges across it, Margaret Island in the middle, the hills and castles of Buda from the other bank. By official count, one-fifth of Hungary's total population lives in Budapest. Many suspect that the real proportion is higher, despite all sorts of measures to discourage the concentration in the capital.

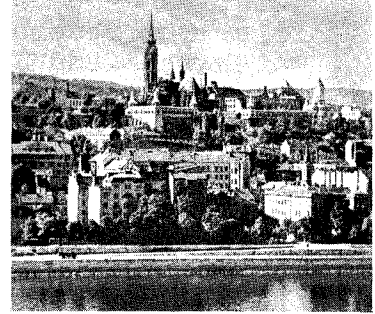


In company now with Skodas, Moskviches, Volgas, we are in the heart of the city on the Great Boulevard, Budapest's "Ring." Its various sections bear different names: Jozsef korut (boulevard) leads us into Lenin korut. Jozsef is the most enlightened of the Hapsburgs, Mozart's Joseph II, and at first we think the link to Lenin appropriate if grim. Later we learn that the Lenin boulevard was originally called Erszebet korut, for Franz Josef's gracious, martyred Empress Elisabeth -- a far more fit combination. (The official Budapest tourists' guide has 44 pages of street name-changes. The most important, perhaps, is Sztalin ut, which is now Nepkoztarsasag ut, street of the People's Republic. It is still Andrassy ut to everyone, nevertheless.)

On the Pest side, it is very much a baroque city by Mumford's standards. Broad avenues radiate out from the center and cross the great boulevards, perfect for military parades, vistas unlimited, roofs and windows in line. How proud this city must have felt in 1912! One feels it, almost oppressively, in the great open circle around the Millenary Memorial (built in 1896 to commemorate the thousandth anniversary of the Magyar settlement). It is still an imperial city, though now without an empire.



Like Paris, fortunately, there is more to Budapest than baroque grandeur. In hilly Buda particularly, but even in the older part of Pest near the river, one encounters more modest, varied and pleasing streets, houses, churches, small parks, busts and statuary. Some seem to go back to the century after the city's recapture from the Turks (1686). Others are very new, the houses modern but quietly so. The impression is strong in Budapest generally that nothing at all was built under Horthy or Rakosi, that everything dates either from before 1914 or after 1956. And, in fact, the rate of housing construction since 1957 has been twice as high as in either the pre-war or the post-war decade -- some 60,000 apartments a year now.



How good to see stylish shopwindows again! Even when their contents are not, on examination, particularly spectacular, Budapest knows (as Belgrade, for example, does not) how to make the most of colors, light, ribbons, tags, placards, type, space itself; windows with only a few items look dramatic rather than empty, windows with a wide variety appear sumptuous rather than clogged. The city seems to be just entering the era of "consumer durables" -- radios look passable, phonographs primitive, other electrical equipment professional-looking but apparently for commercial or industrial use. There are, however, many small shops for personal care -- food, specialty food, wines, cosmetics, perfumes -- that are smart, neat, warm, busy and very inviting. Hungarian cooking and wines have long been world-famous: Justly so.

Although Russian has for some time been the officially-approved "second language," German remains in fact the international lingua franca (just as Vienna seems to be where most Hungarians would like to go for a weekend). The bookstores are full of German books of all kinds. There are some in English (mainly technical and language texts), rather more in translation ("Elmer Gantry" seemed to be the latest number). Yet one never knows about languages. When I wanted some shirts laundered, the chambermaid tried Magyar and German, I tried English and French, all to no avail; then I tried Russian and, after a moment's bewilderment, got an answer -- in perfect Croatian.

How would one know that this is the week of the 8th Congress of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party? There are no red banners in the streets, no pictures of the leaders, only once in a while a small placard in a shop window welcoming the delegates. The very building in which the congress is held has no exterior decoration. It is a new building, that of the construction workers' union. It is modular and modest, poured concrete with some glass. The setting is nevertheless dramatic; for across the street still stands the base of the giant Stalin statue which the revolutionaries tore down in 1956.

In the lobby, one hears a round of polite applause -- the Politburo and foreign guests have entered the hall. Old Ferenc Muennich is reading the list of "fraternal delegates" as we take our places inside: Otto Kuusinen of the Soviet Union, Wu Hsiu-chuan of the Chinese People's Republic, Eduard Ochab of Poland, Blas Roca of Cuba

(loudest applause), and so on. The leaders and foreign guests sit on a raised stage above the podium. Behind them a huge red banner is unfurled, and on it a grey-white seal with Lenin's determined profile. The resemblance is unmistakable to the new Kremlin Palace at which the 22nd Soviet party congress was held; one wonders if it required the services of the same West German and British engineers.

Some 600 delegates, plus alternates and invited guests. The delegates strike one by their relative youth; most seem to be in their thirties and forties. There are also quite a few women, several of them handsome and decorously chic. Among the guests in the balcony is the venerable, bearded composer Zoltan Kodaly. His picture with Janos Kadar appears prominently in the morning paper.

Kadar is 51, a former iron worker. He has been through much and his rugged face shows it. He seems nervous, breathing rather rapidly as the formalities conclude. At last Muennich announces that the moment has come for the report of the Central Committee on its work since the last congress in 1959. The First Secretary rises, walks down to the rostrum, removes his wristwatch, puts on his glasses and begins to read -- all in perfect silence. It is difficult to imagine Marshal Tito (or President Kennedy, for that matter) in similar circumstances.

The details of Kadar's report on the state of the nation are readily available. It was, like all such documents, wide-ranging and self-serving; the necessary glosses by Western "observers" (diplomats and journalists) are also available. Suffice it to say here that prices are high but steady, wages are rising, industrial production is above plan, agriculture somewhat below; the party is still waging a "two-front struggle" against "dogmatism" (the Rakosi heritage) and "revisionism" (the shade of Imre Nagy); a third of the party is post-revolutionary, the uniformed police have been reduced, "more than 95 per cent" of political prisoners have been released, the truce with the intellectuals continues.

The "news" of the congress that made headlines -- and, in truth, seemed most to interest the Hungarians as well-- were the attacks on "Albania" by Mr. Kadar, Mr. Kuusinen and others; the rebuttal by Mr. Wu (who in the past six weeks has made essentially the same speech at party congresses in Sofia, Budapest and Prague); the surrebuttals by Gyula Kallai and others; and the final resolution upholding the Khrushchevian position. The details and doctrinal subtleties involved in this discussion, interesting as they seemed at the time, do not now bear elaboration. For the Italian party congress and Marshal Tito's trip to Russia have already left all this far behind. The struggle is obviously picking up momentum, and many Hungarians are doubtless watching it as their ancestors followed the frustrations of the House of Austria a century ago or the divisions of the Mongols when the Great Khan died.

It had been snowing three days when we left Budapest, and only part of the road for Vienna is clear. Passing through Gyor, one of the stormiest centers of the 1956 revolt, we see a column of young soldiers marching and singing; the uniforms are of the bulky Soviet design, but the song and cadence seem indubitably Magyar.

After a while, the road divides and we go left, on the newer section. The old road to the right goes through a strip of territory ceded to Czechoslovakia. The new road is fast and clear, and we speed up. Suddenly we see it: a huge belt of cleared land, then watch towers and spotlights, then ugly, ugly barbed wire some 50 feet high. It is real, after all.

Nickelsdorf, the first Austrian village: it was world famous for a few weeks six years ago when the refugees streamed through. That was before the barrier was raised again; now, on a wintry weekend, it is sleepy and quiet as it probably has always been. The Austrian villages, when one looks at the houses closely, are much the same as those on the Hungarian side, but here the Kaisergelb is fresh and bright. How lovely Budapest must have looked in the color!

Cordially,

Anatole Shub
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