



Ágnes Széchenyi

Among reactionaries

Ferenc Fejtő (1908–2008)

When, in 1989, Ferenc Fejtő paid a fleeting visit to Hungary after fifty years of exile, the eighty year–old found the time to meet a great many of the intellectual founders of the nascent democracy. Ágnes Széchenyi, his secretary at the time, pays tribute to a man "unwavering in his principles, but flexible and open in his practice".

"To every thing there is a season... A time to be born, and a time to die," says *Ecclesiastes*. The Lord may have given just a few months short of ninety–nine years to Ferenc Fejtő, who was on fairly good terms with Him, and even wrote a book about Him, but his death still strikes one as premature.

I am looking back in my diary for 1989, and I see that from Paris he listed all the things he would like to do in Budapest. He arrived back in his native country on 13 June of that year, after an absence of more than fifty years, in order to attend the official reburial that was to be held for Imre Nagy and other martyrs of the 1956 revolution. The day after his return he travelled down to Lake Balaton to take a swim (he was certainly one for living and enjoying himself); the following day he met with his publisher, because they were going to put out a new edition of *Sentimental Journey*, the 1937 novel that he himself had chosen as his calling card for the return. That afternoon, on the evidence of my diary, he took a stroll with Tamás Miklós, who, at a time when the Kádár era still seemed to be in full flow, had been authorised to use the title *Medvetánc* (Bear Dance) for an academic sociology journal, edited by Bálint Magyar and with a board that included Fejtő and György Konrád.

The sixteenth was the day of the funeral, then the next day a dinner was held at my place with sociologist György Litván, historian Miklós Lackó, literary historian Erzsébet Vezér and Konrád among the guests. Fejtő arrived with two uninvited journalists, one French, the other Italian, and also some two hours late, because he had forgotten the house number and had started checking the names on doorbells from the far end of the street, criss–crossing from the odd to the even numbers. He was particularly keen to have a one–on–one meeting with literary historian Péter Agárdi, who had written a book about Fejtő's younger days. This was at a time when Fejtő was still *persona non grata* in Hungary, primarily because he was an outspoken critic of all Communist regimes, as chronicled in his book *A History of the People's Democracies: Eastern Europe since Stalin* (translated into English from the original French in 1971). Agárdi was still a party functionary at the time he wrote the book, so the meeting had a certain political piquancy. Another guest who arrived after the meal and with whom he wished to speak privately was Rezső Nyers, the leading advocate of socialist reform within the Hungarian regime after 1968;

and, if I rightly recall, he also quizzed Miklós Németh, the prime minister at the time, about the real situation.

We then fitted in a walk to his former dwelling on Limanova Square in the Fourteenth District (Zugló), a short distance from City Park, and Korong Road nearby. The square, named after the place in Poland where Austro–Hungarian forces had stopped the Russian imperial army in the early days of the First World War, was also where László Rajk had lived as Communist Minister of the Interior until Rákosi had him executed as an early show–trial victim in 1949. Fejtő also wanted to meet up with the son, likewise László Rajk, who by 1989 had long been one of Hungary's leading dissidents and with whom he had cultivated a close relationship. And that was Fejtő's eternal refrain: I want to see him. Over a light supper, he met with representatives of the country's then re–emergent Social Democrat grouping and was far from happy with what he saw. He went to the swimming baths. At a dinner put on by the publisher Magvető, he met with the cream of Hungarian literature: the novelists Mária Ember, Péter Esterházy, Miklós Mészöly, Péter Nádas and György Spiró, poets György Petri and István Eörsi. He also roamed around the city with writer and translator Emil Kolozsvári Grandpierre, a friend from his younger days.

Then there were other old acquaintances: Lili, the cellist wife of literary historian Károly Horváth, and in Szentendre with the painter Piroska Jávör and the sculptor Tamás Asszonyi — they somehow counted as almost relatives. He was also determined to hug Magda Tarján, who had been secretary for the literary magazine *Szép Szó* ("Fine Words"). My diary also tells me that I organized meetings with writers Dénes Csengey and Sándor Csoóri, as he was interested in the philosophically oriented monthly periodical *Világosság* ("Lucidity"), with film critic Ervin Gyertyán, as well as with a number of economists, because he did not make the mistake that philosophy graduates often do of imagining the world is run by ideas. He signed something like three hundred copies of his book and gave around thirty interviews. All that in the space of six days, after which he asked us to take him to Cracow, to a conference at which some members of the former Polish opposition were expecting him to turn up. On 31 August of that summer he turned eighty. Having been the organizer of his programme and constant escort, I slept for two days when it was over — and I always had to think that this might be the last time I saw him.

I looked up those pages in the diary in order to illustrate the endless curiosity and self–assured sense of being at home that were so typical of Fejtő. His residence in Neuilly had long been a place of pilgrimage; he was completely abreast with developments in Hungary, knowing what intellectual, academic and political attainments each person brought to the game. He was aware of, or at least sensed, the particular attitude and measure of civil courage any person mustered in their dealings with the regime; indeed, what sort of person they were.

He was unwavering in his principles, but flexible and open in his practice.

In the autumn of 1930, the time of a huge demonstration of workers in Budapest, when the Miklós Bartha Society moved to the Left, Fejtő, along with poet Attila József, was tempted to dabble with Communism. The ephemeral 1932 initiatives of literary magazine *Szadadon* ("Freely") and the political *Valóság* ("Reality") to which he contributed were mementos of that era. Then came his arrest, his beating with rubber truncheons, a prison stretch, and disillusionment.

Towards the end of the brief post-war period of coalition government, Fejtő was blamed for having loosed Attila József from the spell of Communism. The Marxist ideologue György Lukács even sought him out in Paris to demand that he undertake public self-criticism on the matter, and to assure him that if he were to do so, the Hungarian Workers' Party that was emerging with the winding-up of the Social Democrat Party could admit him as a member. The Communists simply forced ordinary members of the latter organization to transfer to the new party, but people of note were obliged to be more demonstrative about their change in affiliation. At the time, Fejtő was head of the Hungarian press office in Paris. He viewed it as an early warning of what was in store that he was being asked to tell a lie, and that it was Lukács, of all people, who should transmit that demand.

He had an ambivalent attitude to Lukács, given that the latter considered him to be no more than a journalist, which was condescending to say the least, even if partly true. Quite a few people refer to Fejtő as being a historian, but that is not right either: he was an analytical commentator on the present day, being for decades one of Agence France-Presse's expert correspondents, which is not a lesser position than being a historian — just *different*. And no less a person than Professor Éva H. Balázs, that grand dame of history, was willing to acknowledge that. When a group of us were editing the international *Hommage à Ferenc Fejtő* that was put out to coincide with his ninetieth birthday, we also asked her to contribute as one of the world's authorities on the Enlightenment, since Fejtő had himself written a well-regarded 1953 monograph on Emperor Joseph II, *Un Habsbourg révolutionnaire: Joseph II. Portrait d'un despote éclairé*. Professor Balázs sent us an unpublished manuscript on the emperor with a note in the margin that said, "Damn that Fejtő! He spent two weeks in Vienna checking sources; I spent years. However, what he writes stands up; his instincts are enviably impressive.") Fejtő told Lukács in Paris that the position was precisely the reverse: in prison he himself had still been a Communist when he received a visit from Attila József, who brought him the news that the Communists' treachery had been instrumental in helping Hitler to power over the Social Democrats. Fejtő had been a stauncher, truer Communist than József. After he had become disillusioned, or, to be more accurate, after they had jointly become disillusioned, he had "constructed" — Fejtő's own word for it — his own world view.

I would make *Sentimental Journey* a set book in school. It is a cornerstone in my life, one of the most personal books that I have read. Once Fejtő was released from prison, he made a trip to visit all the relatives who were confined behind the borders imposed under the Treaty of Trianon in 1920. He travelled and he cogitated. Within the space of four weeks he found a "cosy" world view. "Forsaking the fanatical, barbarous and cumbersome formalities of vulgar Marxism," he dealt with "the formalities that had sprung forth from Western civilisation." It will be better to carry on quoting him: his way of putting it was as yet future tense, a sound check, asking himself what his new world view would be like:

Will it have within it freedom and also the chance for heresy, to which I am prone; and will it have within it the discipline without which freedom is just decay and frivolity? Will it have within it the possibility for alliance, for community, and at the same time for hygienic solitude? Immunity from prejudices and prescriptions, and at the same time a humble bowing of the head before the kinds of ultimate truths without which life is not worth living? Will it have within it piety and mockery, the

joint cult of writing and humanity, prudent courage and necessary cowardice, level-headedness and feeling one's way?

He goes on to list his own *idées fixes*:

I personally identify with the cause of the hard-done-by and the "poor" in general. This is madness because by descent, education and needs I am middle class; I am fond of middle-class comforts, doubts and certainty, a middle-class diet and self-esteem, second-class compartments, the front rows in the stalls.

Plaintive? Well, yes. Noble? That too, but that is hardly the point. More importantly, did he keep to that promise?

Yes — for the rest of his life. Fejtő's first truly mature act as an intellectual was in 1936 to work as co-editor with Zoltán Gáspár and Zsigmond Reményik, under joint editors-in-chief Pál Ignóty and Attila József and with the financial backing of the Hatvany family, in launching *Szép Szó*. The magazine's title, as one now knows, was intended to allude to reason incarnate, rational thinking, not frills and furbelows. The magazine also had political goals, seeking to set itself up as a "reformed" liberal democratic organ and to accommodate every shade of opinion on the non-Communist left wing. The individual who towered out of *Szép Szó*, of course, was Attila József, who published more than 70 of his poems in it. A common thread running through the structure of Fejtő's world view, the magazine's mission, and József's 1935 poem "Give Me Air!" is the interdependence of freedom and order. The Horthy regime that ruled Hungary from 1919 until 1944 began and ended as a semi-fascist dictatorship deficient in freedom.

Fejtő was able to leave Hungary perfectly legally in 1938 as the Paris correspondent for *Népszava* ("People's Voice"), the Social Democrats' daily paper, though hardly by choice. On his hasty departure he was unable to take proper leave of his nearest and dearest. His half-brothers, Kornél and Ede, were to fall in the Second World War; his father died of terminal exhaustion in a cattle truck crawling its way to Auschwitz. Shortly before Hungary's change to pluralistic democracy in 1989–90, I recorded several hours of material for a TV interview with Fejtő in his Paris home. It turned out that I am a lousy reporter. He began telling a story of how, when the war was over, he had returned to Hungary and made a trip to Nagykanizsa... He stood up and, without the slightest regard for the interview, stepped outside the camera's view, went over to his writing desk and pulled out of a drawer the keys to the family's house and his father's bookshop. He then sat back on camera and, silently weeping, showed just those: they were all that had remained. At a moment like that, a real professional would just leave his or her "victim" to weep in front of the camera. I quickly changed the subject instead.

There was just one thing that Ferenc Fejtő would still like to have accomplished, and that was to see the entire run of *Szép Szó* converted to digital form. For the sake of those who will not be aware, the close on forty issues of the magazine were produced on the crummiest paper imaginable. The cheap, shoddy newsprint is now crumbling and it was necessary to remove any copies from the open shelves of libraries ten years and more ago. It would be no exaggeration to say that any reader making copious notes, let alone photocopies, would effectively be destroying the copy. Fejtő wrote to the minister of culture of the first leftwing government after the "change" to beg

him to set aside money for this project from his contingency funds. He got no response, so he wrote again. Not so much as a telephone call back. I know all this, because the letters were written and printed out on my computer, and I myself put them in the post box. The present government, as I read, regards Ferenc Fejtő's demise as a loss for the nation. Rather than a wreath and *fine words*, I would beseech those responsible, if they truly wish to preserve his legacy, to put the money into that. So he may rest in peace in the earth of Nagykanizsa.

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