

The Petöfi-circle

István Eörsi*

I would like to use the dubious privilege of being a writer and not a serious historian. That gives me the excuse of mixing the historical facts and processes with subjective remembrances and comments. After all I was present at some of the most exciting discussions of the Petöfi-circle, I even took active part in them as heckler, I know most of the protagonists of that time, their previous and their later story. So I can see the exalted pathos of the historical moment in a more ironical light, knowing that this irony hits me and my hopes as well. The proper history of the Petöfi-Circle is only a matter of some months, from the May 1956 till the outbreak of the revolution, on the 23 October. Its peculiarity and its importance cannot be understood without the knowledge of the preceding events, and cannot be evaluated without the consequences of its activity. In 1945 the Red Army occupied (or liberated) a half-feudal, underdeveloped country. Among the ten million inhabitants there were three million peasants absolutely landless. The landlord-peasant-relation can be characterized by the absurd fact, that in some districts the landless peasants used to kiss the hand of the landlord, when they met. There was a restricted multi-party-system, with open vote; some middle-left-parties were permitted, but under humiliating conditions, so that they could not

* In de tekst, zoals door de spreker opgestuurd, zijn enkele anekdotes ingevoegd. Deze passages (in kleiner lettertype) zijn door ons van band af op papier gezet. Voor eventuele fouten in de weergave zijn wij verantwoordelijk. Red.

endanger the rule of the so called historical classes. The state was under the control of the aristocrats and the gentry. They even took part in the process of industrialization, but for the lack of a strong national-bourgeois class they regarded the citizen and even the bourgeois mentality as a not-Hungarian, cosmopolitan conspiracy. Actually, the middle class, in the European sense of the word, had in Hungary in a large measure, a German or Jewish origin. Both the German and the Jewish intellectuals and citizens made strong assimilatory efforts, and they really played an important role in the cultural and social life, but only the assimilation of the Germans was completely accepted by the common opinion.

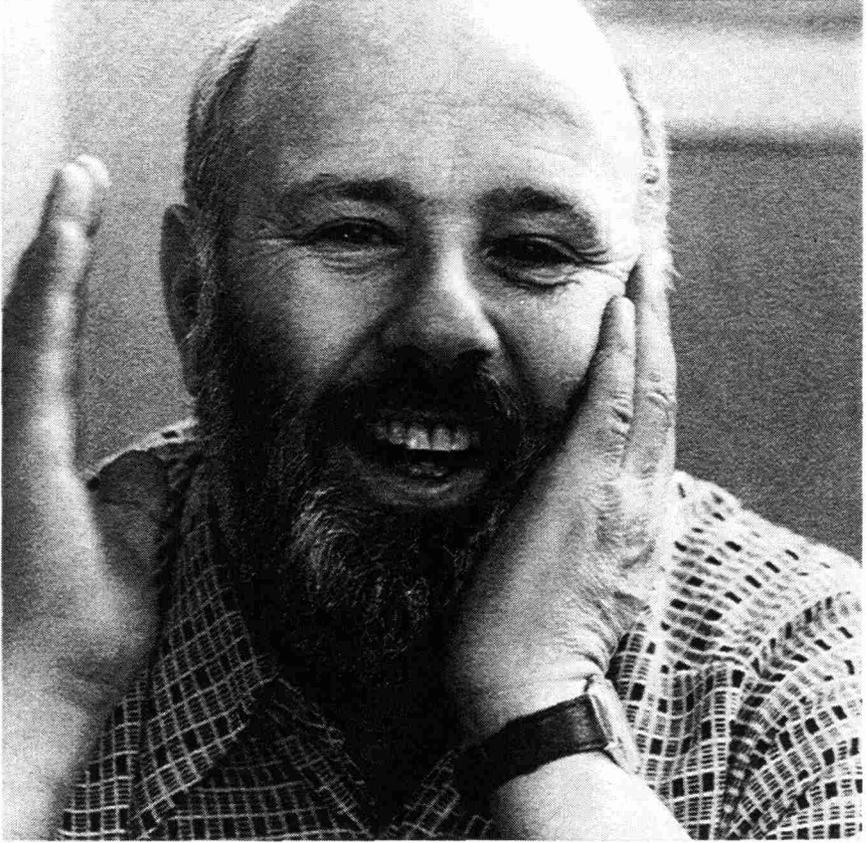
Regent Horthy came to power in 1920, and had to overcome two terrible shocks. First of all he could only march into Budapest as the consequence of the victory of international, interventional forces against the Hungarian Red Army, which tried to defend the historical borders of the country. The monstrous memory of the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919, which nevertheless crushed the power of the so called historical classes, provided the Horthy-system from the beginning to its last day with anticommunist, antisoviet, antiprogressive, and even with antisemitic pathos and propaganda. The second shock was, that Horthy had to accept, in exchange for international support, the Trianon-Treaty (1920), which bereft Hungary from two-thirds of its territory.

This treaty provided the system from the beginning to its last day with nationalist, chauvinistic, irredentist pathos and propaganda, which isolated Hungary from its neighbours and compelled Horthy and his radical and more moderate governments to become worthy of the friendship and support of the strongest power of the geopolitical region, of Germany, because only Germany had the power to give back the former Hungarian territories. This policy led to the servile subjection to the Nazi-Germany in the war, to incredible sacrifices, which made the people loathe the war. No wonder, that the Red Army was regarded by the majority of the inhabitant not as conquering, but as liberating force. Not only the Jews in Budapest, who owed their life to the Red Army - while ca 450.000 Jews in the country were deported and killed, mostly in Auschwitz - but the workers and the peasants and a big part of the intellectuals and the middle class were full with optimistic expectations, although the soldiers behaved themselves towards them in many places as mad beasts. Nevertheless, big landlord farming was over, land was distributed to the peasants in the half-feudal Hungary; big factories were nationalized; sons of workers and peasants were accepted in large numbers to the universities;

there was a multi party-system, which in spite of being restricted to the so-called democratic parties and being compelled to endure the constant Soviet military pressure, still insured a much greater freedom, than Hungary had at any time in the past.

The trouble with Soviets was not, that they marched in, but that they forgot to march out in 1947, after the Peace-Treaty of Paris. Thanks to the big World-Dividing-Conspiracy of Yalta they established in 1949 a Stalinist one-party-system. The peasants were compelled to enter with their recently received land into kolkhoz-like cooperatives, and were robbed out by the so-called gathering tax-system. The workers soon learnt that nationalisation doesn't rescue them from exploitation. The technical development led to continuous readjustment, that means: raising of the norms, the central planning couldn't fulfil the demands and caused irrational voluntarism in the production, in the wage- and price-system. The intellectual freedom was over, only very few thoughts, very few contents and forms were permitted, but the few things which were permitted were at the same time obligatory. Police terror, which was focused between 1945 and 1949 mostly against Nazi and Horthyst functionaries, turned now against democratic politicians and intellectuals, even against non-Moscovite communists, against everybody, who could potentially endanger the rule of the cruel clique around our little Stalin named Mátyás Rákosi. The turning-point was in 1949 the execution of László Rajk, the former Minister of the Interior, a hero of the Spanish Civil War and of the anti-nazi resistance in Hungary, he himself a convinced stalinist and first initiator of the communist police-dictatorship even in the transitory period before 1949.

How absurd such a process was, to execute Rajk, I can show with an example. In the middle of the sixties I met the ex-politburo member Márton Horváth. He was an old communist too. I asked him whether he voted in the Politburo for or against the death of Rajk. He told: "Rajk was a very good friend of mine and, yes, I voted for his death." "Why did you vote for his death?", I asked him. "You see, László was arrested by the Germans and was tortured incredibly. He was tortured weeks and weeks. Nobody could resist this torture but he didn't say one word. He could resist. And then Rákosi, our little Stalin, told him in a Politburo-session to sign the confession which said: "Yes I was a spy, I was a spy of Tito and I wanted to kill



István Eörsi

Rákosi". Then I thought: "László is such a strong man. If he would not commit anything then, they will not get such a confession out of him now. And therefore I voted for his death". Then I asked Márton Horváth: "So you voted for his death because he was a very honest and strong man?" "Yes", he answered, "I voted for his death because I knew he was a very honest and strong man."

With this little story I want to show you the absurdity of these processes. Many of the communists (who were not living in Moscow) who had fought against the Nazi's were arrested, tortured and condemned to death because Rákosi and the Moscovites thought that if they were courageous enough to fight the Nazi's they would later fight against them too. So it was better to finish them.

Police translocations, detentions, torture of the political prisoners were the usual practice, the so called class-struggle sharpened every day, at the same rhythm as the population became poorer and poorer.

The death of Stalin, in March 1953 made the inevitable change finally possible. The system became already economically bankrupt, the earlier confidence shrunk even among the communists. This latter process was naturally very complicated and contradictory. The intellectuals, who were cheated cheaters, that means obedient or enthusiastic tools and in the same time victims of the bad power, had to find themselves face to face with an alternative. One part of them chose to be a wheel or a screw in the machinery, and so saved its soul from a moral crises. An other part tried, with the words of the communist poet László Benjamin, "*to repair the irreparable*", and engaged itself in a process of moral recompensation, which brought many of them after the repression of the revolution of 1956 to the prison or even to the gallows. Between these two extremes there were a lot of very individual varieties of cynical and selfdeceiving attitudes. Since the process of disillusionment didn't begin at the same time, those, whose critical thinking awoke in 1950 didn't trust their colleagues who tried to take a similar way in 1952 or 1954.

To avoid a judging attitude, I would like to say in this connection some words about myself. I began my literary career in 1952 with terrible stalinist poems. I wrote ten or twelve such terrible poems. I got a State Reward for it. Since then, I never got such

a reward anymore, so I think it's OK now. Then, in 1953, I remember when Stalin died. I was lying with my pregnant wife in bed, and heard on the radio that he died. We wept. Three months later already, Imre Nagy, the new minister-president, came to power as a consequence of the death of Stalin and as a consequence of the necessity to realize reforms. I became an enthusiastic believer in the policy of Nagy. I began my career as a critical communist. Not only to save my own honesty. I wanted to save the idea that it was possible to be honest and communist. I really believed that it was possible to make communism in an honest way and I was not alone in this believe. I remember that when I was arrested on the 9th of december 1956, that I felt it was correct that I was arrested. I had written poems that were sins to write so I had to sit for it. The problem was that I not only thought it. After five weeks I got to permission to talk with a lawyer, naturally in the present of an officer. The lawyer, who was an old friend of my father (who was a lawyer too) told me: "István if want to come out you have to admit that you made mistakes. If you admit your faults there will be a trial but you will be released." I told him: "Yes, I made faults. I know I made faults." And the officer who was sitting next to me was very glad to hear this, because I never admitted my errors before. "What were your mistakes?", he asked excited. "I wrote poems for Stalin. That was my mistake", I answered him. After this the lawyer was thrown out and I was thrown in an isolationcel. So even in those times I thought that it was good that I was thrown in prison. In prison I would save my own soul and the soul of the real communist. In prison I wrote poems in my mind, because I had no paper. I wrote: "My colour is the real red colour, the colour of their flag is red because it is the colour of blood".

In the rich variety of the individual processes there was - at least before 1956 - one common characteristic: the intellectuals, who were under the influence of Marxism, regarded this process of disillusionment as a triumph of the genuine - that is: non-dogmatic, non-sectarian - Marxism. They wanted to rehabilitate, together with their own guilty person, the credibility and the good scientific reputation of Marxism too.

The process of individual awakening was accelerated by historical facts. Three months after the death of Stalin, in June 1953 a new Minister-president was appointed, Imre Nagy. He was an old communist too, spent several years in Soviet exile, but his political style, his way of thinking, and even his *image* were very different from the other leading figures of the Communist Party. He sprung from the people - to use the fashionable expression of those years - looked and spoke like a Hungarian peasant, discovered and criticised very early the absurdities of planned economy, the utmost centralisation in the state-guidance of production, and the forced collectivisation of agriculture. His government programme promised better living standards, more independence for the single collective farms, the release of the delivery obligation in the agriculture, more democracy in social life, more patriotic educational system and the restoration of the so called socialist legality. He began to put his programme into effect, people were released from prisons and detention camps, death-sentences were not carried out any more, a new, critical way of thinking could find publicity, new forms of political organizations came into being, among others the Petöfi-Circle, which was founded in 1954, the overcentralized structure of the national economy began to become looser and began to adjust itself more to real possibilities and needs. But the efforts of Imre Nagy and his few comrades were incompatible with the very existence of the Rákosist state- and party-bureaucracy. Rákosi remained the first secretary of the Communist Party, and with the help of his manipulating and organizing skill and soviet connections, started a counter-attack, and in March 1955 he got the Soviet support to overthrow the government of Imre Nagy. Nagy was excluded from the party, and the critical intellectuals were under the threat of being put to silence again, and were menaced even with new processes and other suppressive measures. But in January 1956 the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party, and the secret, but generally known speech of Chruscsev about the personality cult, that is about the astonishing crimes of Stalin, gave rise to a new, critical wave, which led in July tot he dismissal of Rákosi, and the appointment of his closest companion Gerö to the post of the first secretary of the Communist party. Imre Nagy was not rehabilitated yet, but he remained the invisible leader of all the reformist forces and movements. He was the invisible head of the Petöfi-Circle too, in spite of the fact, that he never visited the discussions of this circle. He, a convinced and disciplined communist, was unwilling to develop his views and perspectives before an other public body as the Central Committee of the

Communist Party. This opportunity presented itself for him only in the night of the first day of the revolution, on the 23th October 1956, and on the very same day the Petöfi-Circle ceased to be.

The story of the Petöfi-Circle began with István Lakatos, a young poet, who was never a communist, and belonged even as writer to the prohibited successors of the most important Hungarian literary movement of the 20th Century, which had the characteristic name 'Occident', 'Nyugat'. He was not very much interested in the everyday politics, but as a forbidden writer he was interested in the civil rights, in the free press and in the freedom to speak. He founded in 1954 a circle for young intellectuals in the National Museum, and called it Bessenyei Circle. György Bessenyei belonged to the regiment of the Guards under Maria Theresia, and was a writer under the influence of the French Enlightenment, especially of Voltaire. Not a very great artist, but he was the man, with whom the modern, critical, anti-feudal, anti-clerical way of thinking got established in the Hungarian literature. The undertaking of Lakatos was quite unusual: in a Stalinist state nothing can be organized outside of the hierarchies, all dependent on the strictly centralized Communist Party. Even a tourist group could have not been brought to life outside of an established youth- or sport-organization. But under the first government of Imre Nagy, in a time, when the moral crises shattered the followers of the Communist system, the party, and its youth-organization, the Union of Working Youth (DISZ) thought more suitable not to prohibit the new initiation, but try to take over leadership. First of all the official party bureaucrats demanded to rename the circle. The name of Bessenyei sounded perhaps too critical, too bourgeois, it had no revolutionary connotations. Instead of Bessenyei the DISZ proposed the name of the great revolutionary poet Petöfi, who died, as he was 26 years old, after a crushed revolution, in 1849, on the battle-field. The communist system, according to its real nature, and in spite of its confessed ideology, was very conservative and authoritarian, nevertheless it had the pretension to expropriate the whole revolutionary tradition of the nation. But the name of Petöfi, which was chosen to prove, that the circle in question is under the control of the party, was double-edged. If a revolutionary disposition keeps spreading among the youth, Petöfi's name regains at all times its original, revolutionary sense. That is the common trap of all quasi-revolutionary systems: the people begin to take seriously the real message of the officially declared ideology and the nationalized heroes of the system,

they compare their ideal substance with the reality, and want to abolish the unbearable contradiction between them.

Lakatos and his friends consented to the new name. 25th March 1955 was the day when the Petöfi-Circle was founded, or newly founded. Lakatos remained still a member of it, but almost everyone in the new leadership belonged to the party. This party however was not homogeneous any more. Rákosi's counter-offensive was at its height, but even that couldn't prevent some supporters of Imre Nagy taking part in the leadership. Gábor Tánczos was appointed to the secretary of the circle. He was in my year on the university between 1949 and 1953: a convinced communist, a leading youth-functionary in those years, in which idealism could be a public danger. Nevertheless he failed to denounce one of his superiors, who was arrested as a Trotskyite spy, consequently he lost his posts. So he could become susceptible to the new ideas inside the communist movement, and he developed into a reform-communist, and became an ardent follower of Imre Nagy. The high functionaries of the communist youth organisation had no other intention but to rehabilitate him, and they had not the faintest suspicion, that he becomes as devoted a supporter of the new wave of reform-communism, as he used to be of the stalinist line. His real problem, and the problem of all those reformists, who played a role in the leadership of the Petöfi-Circle, became evident only, when the current of events took a more radical turn, than they foresaw or intended. Similarly to Imre Nagy they wanted to preserve the leading role of the Communist Party in the process of reform, so they got gradually between two fires. The dogmatic functionaries regarded them as traitors, the radical intellectuals, who participated in the discussions of the Petöfi-Circle, condemned them as cowards. Tánczos had great merits in organizing the very important discussions of the Petöfi-Circle, and so he played an important role in the intellectual development which culminated in the revolution, but he himself was afraid of it. He and some of his friends, as the *Zauberlehrling* of Goethe, had to experience with despair, that they couldn't stop the process they initiated. On the 24th October he adjured the revolutionaries in a broadcast-speech to lay down their arms. They didn't listen to him, or to anybody else included Imre Nagy in this question. In 1958 he was condemned to fifteen years imprisonment. He was released in 1962. In 1979 he joined an action of the new opposition and after being threatened for that, he hanged himself. The other leaders of the Petöfi Circle had not such an important role and such a tragic fate. Some of them, the followers of the Stalinist Rákosi,

belonged later to the followers of Kádár. The most prominent among them, Ervin Hollós, who was earlier a fervent Stalinist leader of the Communist Youth organization, played as head of the police-department of political investigation a terrible role in the first, murderous years of Kádár. Some political friends of Tánczos were imprisoned as well, afterwards they were released, and survived, but they were characterized by the same schizophrenic disruption as Tánczos.

Back to the story, to the chronological order. In the spring of 1956, as a consequence of the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party, the Petöfi Circle got a new Secretariat and a new leadership. The Reform-Communists pushed themselves forward, but they had to pay a dishonourable price for it: they had to omit Lakatos, who was not a communist at all. According to the official explanation he didn't play an active role in the Petöfi Circle any more. As a matter of fact, the whole Petöfi-Circle was not very active in the previous period, because of the aforesaid offensive of Rákosi which led to the fall of the Nagy-Government. But now the new leadership began to organize some discussions, which mobilized the whole intellectual life in Hungary. The first took place on the 5th May, and was continued on the 20th June about the problems of economics. Between these two discussions there were three other, very important meetings: that of the historians, on the 30th May and an other about the situation of the philosophy on the 15th June. The third was held on the 18th June: the Petöfi-circle met the Union of Anti-Nazi partisans, among them a lot of antifascists and communists, who were imprisoned and tortured in the years between 1949 and 1953. The most turbulent discussion, with an audience of 6000 people, about the freedom of the press, took place on the 27th June and lasted till the morning. This was an unprecedented scandal, all the holy taboos of the system were violated. On the next day a special police-unit opened fire on a worker's demonstration in Posman. Rákosi used this tragedy as pretext, to reestablish his old, monolithic power. The Central Committee condemned the Petöfi-Circle in resolution, and Rákosi began to organize the so called 'Process of the Four Hundreds', with the purpose of settling accounts with all his enemies, with the political group around Imre Nagy, with the dissident writers, with the critical intellectuals around the Petöfi-Circle. But in the atmosphere of the Twentieth Congress he couldn't realise his plot. In the middle of July Mikojan arrived unexpectedly to Budapest and Rákosi had to pack his luggage. But his successor, Ernö Gerö represented the same

line as he. That was perhaps the reason, that the Petöfi-Circle needed so much time to reorganize itself. The new sequence of discussions didn't continue till the end of September. These meetings - about pedagogy, about economic management, about the technological development and the situation of the young intellectuals, about the possibilities of intensive farming, about arts and crafts and about the relationship of young doctors and society - were professionally on a high level, but they didn't have the tremendous effect of the earlier discussions: the Petöfi-Circle lost in the meantime its monopoly in speaking openly about suppressed political themes. It is characteristic and almost comic, that the last discussion took place on the 23d October. Half a million people were on the streets, and their roaring suppressed the clever arguments about the situation of the young doctors. The meeting lasted till the evening, and the orators were not disturbed by the fact, that the police already opened fire out of the neighbouring building of the Radio against the demonstrating masses.

If we try to reconstruct, 38 years later, the whys and wherefores of the importance of the Petöfi-Circle as unintended initiator of the Hungarian Revolution, we have to go out from the fact, that every autocratic state is based on a voluntary system of values. Every professional field is led by appointed authorities who stand above every criticism. The hierarchic structure of society doesn't allow real discussions, the resolutions of the leading persons and higher authorities are considered not only as inappellable, but even as sanctified. In the moment, when the best minds of the country came together on the occasion of the discussions of the Petöfi-Circle, the forced system of values collapsed and the real order was re-established. That was an awful blow for the stalinist state which couldn't use freely its well proved methods any more. For instance on the discussion of historians the official authorities of the branch were condemned to insignificance in the presence of Domokos Kosáry, a historian of great importance, who was ousted in 1949. The discussion of the philosophers changed into the solemn rehabilitation of the great Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács, who was severely criticised and forced back by the official incarnations of wisdom in 1949 as well.

Lukács was my teacher and I translated his late works. Already in 1919, the time of the first communist system of Béla Kun, he had to emigrate to Austria, Germany and even the Soviet-Union. In the thirties he worked out his Blum-theories - Blum was his

pseudonym - in which he tried to convince the party that the proletarian dictatorship was not realized in Hungary. He used a term that I find now very funny or even absurd: democratic dictatorship of workers, peasants and intellectuals. He wanted to say that in the Hungarian society there couldn't be a revolution. First there had to be a democracy and then a further development to socialism. In 1945 he returned to Hungary and he had a very great authority among the writers. His early works, who were not marxist, but very famous in Hungary, were due to this authority. In 1949, when the one-party-system was realized, there was a Lukács discussion within the party. Lukács was threatened with a process like Rajk had to face in the same year. Eventually he was forced to a terrible self-criticism and had to retire from the public life.

In the year 1956, he was publishing his work again and was influential among the youth, there was a discussion of the Petöfi-circle. It was planned in a little room but there were thousands of people. So the crowd marched through the street to the university where the discussion took place.

This march looked already like a demonstration. Lukács, who was seventy-one, was walking in the first line with a cigar in his mouth and the youth followed. The whole session developed in to a huge rehabilitation of Lukács and naturally a big blow for the earlier cultural politic.

In his first public manifestation after 1949 Lukács tried to formulate for the first time his opinion about the principle fault of the stalinist politics. I quote: "In our general practise agitation has swallowed up propaganda and bad propaganda swallowed by the same token scientific research. We must understand that this route ought to be the other way around. Without good research there can be no good propaganda and without good propaganda there can not be good agitation".

Secondly every autocratic state is based on a system of taboos. The leaders of the party and the state are infallible, or if not, than they turn out to be devilish spies and traitors. The system of Horthy was in every aspect worse than the system of Rákosi. The planned economy is in every aspect better than the free market. We are marching towards socialism, and socialism is in every aspect better than capitalism. The Soviet Union is in every aspect good. America is in every aspect bad. COMECON helps

us generously. And so on. But in the course of discussions all these taboos were exposed as obvious lies. For instance the widow of László Rajk, who was imprisoned as well and spent five years mostly in solidarity confinement, compared the conditions in the jail under Rákosi with those under Horthy. Her son was four months old, when she, a few days after her husband, was arrested, and was five and a half year old, when she met him again. In the meantime she didn't hear anything about him, she couldn't receive a letter or a visitor, even food- and clothes-packets were forbidden, she had to endure hunger; the situation of the men was even worse, they were beaten up, if they protested against mistreatment. Rákosi, on the other side, could write a letter from the prison of Horthy to the Minister of Justice, if something didn't please him. While an other orator, Tibor Méray analyzed the absurdities of the Rajk-process, people in the audience were shouting "Killers", and the taboo of the infallible, good leaders was reduced to nothing in the most cruel way. The same taboo was annihilated by the significant writer Tibor Déry as well, who in his speech at the discussion about the freedom of the press dared to criticise by name the cultural leaders of the system, he criticised even the supreme cultural pontiff József Révai, who silenced him as writer four years earlier by initiating the so called Déry-discussion. He even hazarded the remark, that every value produced in the Hungarian literature since 1949 was created not with the help, but against the will of the cultural policy of the party. (By the way, in the debate about the situation of philosophy, twelve days earlier, Georg Lukács expressed a very similar view, however without mentioning names: according to him it was just the talented men that were destroyed and just the various sorts of untalented careerists that were praised to the sky at this time.) Déry's criticism gave rise to an unprecedented scandal. Ervin Hollós, at the presidential table, was shouting: "Hands off our leaders, hands off Comrade Révai!"

During the discussion an old friend of mine, his name was Péter Vajda, was sitting before me. As he was sixteen years old he got married, left school, and became an agent of the secret police. I knew that. He was sitting before me in plain clothes with three colleagues beside him. When Hollós started criticising Révai he stood up and shouted: "Traitor of the country". Then I jumped up and screamed: "And you are a member of the secret police, is that better?". He looked at me and went away with his friends. It was a tremendous scandal in the room.

But - even worse - Déry didn't confine himself to the criticism of persons. I quote: "As long as we insist on focusing our main criticism on persons and faults in political practise and do not choose to examine our own system of thought using the exact marxist-leninist method to identify specific errors - we can only reach the meagre result of replacing the worse with less bad. Thus the national-chariot will be drawn by limping donkeys instead of the limping race-horses of today." This argumentation, which contributed some weeks later to his exclusion from the party, and played a role one year later in the so called 'Writer's process', where he was condemned to six years prison, was followed by a rather prophetic perception: "Let the Lord be my witness - I am not one who is keen on defending our present political leaders. But when I look at those who are attacking them today - those who used to take their cue from a mere frown and who held their breath at the hint of a muscle in their leaders back flexing - who now suddenly abandon them in expectation of taking their place - when I see all of this I almost take a fancy to defend the old against these new sprouts." Nevertheless - he adds - the task is now to do away with both of them. As we can see, Déry's attack was not only directed against the dogmatic saints of the party - he didn't want to tolerate the normal, ambitious party-functionaries either, who already prepared themselves for seizing the power. But it is even more interesting, and typical of those times, that Déry in his criticism appealed to the genuine marxist-leninist method, he insisted on the thesis, that even if the system of our thinking is assailable, we can rectify it with the help of our method of thinking.

Déry was in those days sixty years old and was not much later put in prison. There he changed very much. He came out of prison as an old man, who was no longer in opposition with the system but with the universe. He remained a very good writer.

At the beginning of his speech Déry raised three questions. All of them were suitable for destroying the fundamental taboos of the totalitarian system. I quote: "What is the reason for our economic troubles? What is the reason for the whole society feeling ill at ease?" The official explanation, which wanted to make us believe, that the only source of our problems lies in the *Personenkult* (idolization), is unsatisfactory. Déry's explanation runs as follows: "The source of our troubles is lack of freedom. To avoid a misunderstanding here - I refer to freedom as the freedom of the indi-

vidual restrained through the obligations to the socialist society. Restricted economically, emotionally and intellectually. I think that the main fault here is the disproportion between the freedom and the social obligation of the individual."

The compulsory taboo was, that our society, marching towards socialism, grants us the maximum of freedom mankind ever experienced. Déry revealed openly, as the street-boy in the tale of Anderson, what everybody has seen, that the king is naked, and the tumultuous scenes in the auditorium proved perfectly clear, that those present understood the message.

It would need too many explanations to talk about all the critical points which contributed to the general taboo-destroying activity of those who participated in the discussions of the Petöfi-Circle. Instead of enumerating them I try to speak more in detail about one important question, about the criticism of the economic structure and of the method of national planning. Imre Sziklai, who joined the communist movement as a young boy in 1941, and who began his career after the liberation as party-functionary and became a professor of marxism-leninism on the University of Economy, felt himself later gradually disappointed, left his privileges and joined this time the ruling class, that is the proletariat, and became a turner. In his speech he made clear, that the workers are not interested in the technical development, the interest of the national economy are for them incomprehensible abstractions. The workers don't introduce innovations, or they introduce them secretly, because the reward they get for them is much less than their damage when in consequence of the triumphantly applied new method their norms are raised. They are not interested in the quality work, because unskilled labour is better paid. The workers do not suffer any damages, if they break the imported, expensive equipment - they even take advantage of it, because it becomes easier for the to fulfil their production norm. Sziklai - breaking the taboo of centralisation - demanded a greater independence for the factories, and he demanded, that the productive workers should have the possibility to take part directly and through their elected representatives in the factory management. With an undisguised hint to Yugoslavia he said, that there is already a precedent for that in the practise of the socialist countries. I quote: "*The workers should be interested in the results of the production of the whole enterprise. They should be permitted to feel stronger as at present, that the factory, the country and the power are all in their possession*". These thoughts reappeared, after the oppression of

the revolution, in the program of the Central Worker's Council of Great-Budapest.

I met Sziklai after the revolution under the shower in Márianoszta, which is a prison in Hungary. I was standing under the shower when a very hairy, little man behind me asked: "Are you Eörsi?". I confirmed. "I'm Sziklai and sitting because of your wife", he said. I was surprised and asked him what he meant. It came out that after the revolution he emigrated to London. A Hungarian friend of him in London received a letter from my first wife. She wrote: "You are pigs having a good life. We are trying to make the best of it and you escape at the first moment. We are sitting here, some in prison, some free, saving our souls and saving our honesty..." The letter went straight to Sziklai's heart and he decided to return to Hungary. On the border he was arrested. On the way from the border to Budapest he was beaten. In Budapest he was condemned to six years in prison. So he was sitting because of my wife. When he was released he tried to commit suicide. He was saved and in 1973 left Hungary and now he lives a sadly, resigned life in Germany.

An other speaker, Ferenc Jánossy, the step-son of Georg Lukács, an extremely original economist, who - coming of a Communist family, collected some valuable practical experiences, for he spent in the early forties three years in the Gulag - used an intellectual test without any oratory ambitions to prove the absurdity of the methods of planning, of making plan targets and plan fulfilment reports. I quote: "Let us suppose that the whole people's economy consists of one coal mine and one power station. The coal mine provides coal for the power station and the power station provides electricity for the coal mine. If all runs well, both coal and electricity are left over. But what is the case when the effectiveness of the two deteriorates? If, for instance in the power station the furnaces are old and if in the coal mine there are violent flood-inrushes and a lot of energy is needed to pump off the excess water. In the most extreme case we can imagine that the coal mine gives all its coal to the power station and in turn uses up all the energy produced by the power station. Thus the efficiency of the circuit grinds to a zero-point because nothing is left to leave the circuit. But in the process of plan-economy we do not measure this degree of efficiency, we only identify the amount of our

coal and our energy production. So if we take the zero-efficiency model and double the non-sense, we have twice as much coal and twice as much energy - but only on paper. In reality we have nothing."

This kind of argumentation didn't destroy only the content of a taboo, but it destroyed the form, and not only the form of one of them: it destroyed the form of taboos in general. Taboos are from such a stuff that they fall to pieces at the mere touch of irony. Taboos which are made publicly ridiculous, can never regain their intellectual authority. The same is the situation with dubious moral values which were earlier regarded as irrefutable. If their protagonists are compelled, only once, to shame themselves because of them, or if they feel the necessity to make excuses publicly for having been used them, these values cannot be restored morally any more. Elemér Balogh, the official philosopher of that time and chief enemy of the Lukács school made complaints about his position as professor of the party academy, which compelled him to rectify theoretically all the party decisions, even the bad ones, as long as they were not carried out, or they were not revoked. He complained, that the disciples of Lukács were in a much better situation. If they didn't agree with a decision, they could allow themselves simply not to write about it. For Balogh it was obviously natural to write against his own convictions if they came into conflict with the line of the party. While confessing that before the audience of the Petöfi-Circle he represented a grotesque attitude; I would say, if it would not be a contradiction in itself, that he represented some kind of objective irony. The moral obligation, to renounce our own truth in favour of the lies of a party, had shown its immoral absurdity, and even Elemér Balogh, who didn't perceive what he was saying, couldn't restore, even not for his personal use, the power of his earlier categorical imperative. In 1965 he committed suicide, I do not know, why. Anyway he got an answer to his problem two weeks before he raised it, in the debate of the historians. Domokos Kosáry quoted some stalinist historians, who defined their task as follows: "Our task is to re-examine our entire activity by the light of the works of Stalin". Kosáry raised the question: "What kind of task is this? Who gave this task? Is it obligatory to take upon ourselves a task which is against our mind? Not everybody takes upon himself a task which is against his mind".

Other more sublime moral problems were put on the agenda too. Some communist intellectuals sought a confrontation before the audience with their own past, with their mistakes, even with their admittable sins. These confessions had nothing to do with the boring or disgusting self-criticism,

which were an integral part of the party-ceremonies. Some old communists wanted not only to gain or to regain confidence, but they wanted to go through a catharsis, to clean themselves for new tasks. Géza Losonczy for instance, an old communist, fighter against the nazis, who was appointed in 1948 to under-secretary in the Prime Minister's office, and in 1949 to Deputy Minister in the Ministry of Culture, and who was imprisoned and tortured between 1951 and 1954, asked ashamed forgiveness from the immortal spirit of Béla Bartók. He had a good reason for that: he wrote in 1949 a reprimanding article, in which he justified the prohibition of the scenic works of Bartók as products of bourgeois decadence. Some months later, in the revolution Losonczy became a Minister of the State. He was the person politically closest to Imre Nagy. He died in the prison under unexplained circumstances in 1958. Others did not die, and tried to remain true to the insights they won in these unforgettable months. Others again tried to forget this episode of their life. Some of them became shallow or rotten cynics, humble or aggressive servants of the limping donkeys, who came to power after the crushing of the revolution.

At the end of his speech Tibor Déry expressed his concern about the free discussions in the Petöfi-Circle. I quote: "I can not rid myself of the suspicion that all these discussions at the Petöfi-Circle are part of a cleverly designed psychological strategy in which they are permitted and supported - just like when the pressure in the kettle gets too great the valve has to be opened to let off some steam." Was he right? There were surely politicians who could act from such tricky motives; others - who were not present at all, and belonged to the so called centre between Mátyás Rákosi and Imre Nagy - had perhaps the intention to exploit the revolt of the intellectuals for their own purposes. Others again expected a renewal of Marxism from these debates. But I think, there are historical events, where the intentions of the participants are not very important. Nobody among us knew, that a revolution was approaching. There was a much bigger pressure in a much bigger kettle, and the valve got stuck in it. Every hope and fear, in connection with the Petöfi-Circle became later justified and at the same time refuted.