

Hungary: Towards the Abyss
By Aljazeera.com
22 May 2013

<http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/peopleandpower/2013/05/201351674859600711.html>

Spring came late to Budapest. When I arrived at the beginning of April the Hungarian capital still glittered with snow, giving the grand palaces that line the River Danube the appearance of huge iced cakes just begging to be eaten. It is an entrancing sight that attracts tourists from all over the world – drawn not only to the fairy-tale architecture of this 'Paris of the East' but also its vibrant street life and rich cultural traditions.

But appearances can be deceptive: like many central European cities, Budapest has endured a fair degree of turbulence over the last hundred years, and the uneasy memories of two world wars still linger amid its castles, monuments and cafes. Today, there are fears that some of the very worst aspects of that history have re-emerged; that elements of political extremism once consigned to the margins have now found their way back to the mainstream.

I had come here to make a film for People & Power that would investigate these changes and find out whether – as some feared – Hungary was really slipping back into the kind of crypto-fascism that saw it allied to Adolf Hitler's Third Reich before and during World War II. From a distance it might seem a little far-fetched that a modern European nation could ever embrace such ideas again, even though the most vocal critics include the governments of several fellow EU states. But as I was to discover very quickly, seen up close there is little doubt about Hungary's slide into authoritarianism. The only thing left to find out was exactly how it had come about and how much further it was likely to go.

It was not difficult to get up to speed with the basics. Hungary is currently run by Prime Minister Viktor Orban. Since taking office three years ago he has drastically changed the political landscape. His detractors call him the 'Victator' and accuse Orban of destroying the fabric of democracy by rewriting the constitution whenever he feels like it, but there is no denying his popularity. In 2010, millions of Hungarians voted to give Orban's Fidesz Party a two-thirds majority in parliament – the source of his considerable political power today.

Orban's rise has coincided with a virulent wave of hate crime against the Hungary's Roma people and an equally shocking upsurge of anti-Semitism. This reached a new low last November with remarks made in parliament by an ultra-right-wing MP called Marton Gyongyosi. A representative of the neo-Nazi Jobbik party, which though officially in opposition, supports or at least endorses many of the positions taken by the Orban government, Gyongyosi called for all the Jews in Hungary to be put on an official list – especially those in government circles or public life who represented a threat to "national security."

To get some context for this extraordinary statement, I went to see the renowned and internationally respected Hungarian philosopher, Agnes Heller. Now a diminutive but fiery 82-year-old, Heller survived Budapest's Jewish ghetto when Hungary was governed by pro-Hitler Nazis. Her father died in Auschwitz.

She agreed to meet me at a friend's flat overlooking the Danube. "It couldn't have happened before," she said. "He could have felt the same, he could have said the same to his friends in private society but never, ever in parliament. There is a limit which is transcended: you step over the limit and you can do more, constant escalation is possible."

Heller, an outspoken critic of Fidesz, was recently the victim of a state sponsored smear campaign which alleged she had embezzled educational funds. There was no evidence and the charges were eventually dropped, but only after pro-government newspapers splashed the bogus story all over their front pages. Then there have been the slogans daubed on her office door at the university. One reads: "Jews should not teach at the University."

"I was attacked for two reasons," she told me, "firstly because I'm a Jew - that is very important because Jews are basically seen as the enemies of the people and secondly because I'm a liberal and if you say someone's a liberal it is worse than if you say he's a Nazi."

Heller is not the only Holocaust survivor alarmed at the new wave of anti-Semitism. Gyorgy Konrad, one of Hungary's leading authors, has written extensively on repression. Both his parents were arrested by the Gestapo and it was only by a miracle that the young Konrad escaped deportation. "The Hungarian authorities were very efficient and helpful to Adolf Eichmann." Konrad tells me, "From the border to Auschwitz it is not very far. The SS took over the trains from there and in the summer of '44 only Hungarian Jews were burned in Auschwitz - 450 thousand."

Seventy years on and Konrad is disturbed by the unimpeded proliferation of neo-Nazi paramilitary organisations. He is scathing about Victor Orban, calling his government a soft dictatorship. "It's a dictatorship because the ruling party created a party state. It means that everything that happens in the state is directed by the party. It means also that it is - as the Germans say - a fuhrerstaat, the state of a leader. And if the boss who is the boss of everything isn't satisfied with somebody's views or words or deeds then this person will not have a possibility to have a decent life."

You will not find any of Konrad's novels on the school curriculum but war criminal Nyiro Jozsef has just been added. A fervent admirer of Hitler's propaganda minister, Josef Goebbels, the popular novelist was a member of the short-lived Arrow Cross parliament which deported 80,000 Jews to Nazi death camps in less than three months. But Nyiro has his fans, including Laszlo Kover, the president of the Hungarian parliament who I met in his sumptuous offices adjacent to the river.

"I think we should not judge Nyiro the author on the basis of a very short political career which was the characteristic of writers both in Romania and other parts of Europe," he told me. "Lots of writers were lured by the ideologies of the Nazis or even the Bolsheviks."

This somewhat indulgent official attitude towards war criminals can be seen in the government's treatment of Laszlo Csatory who, according to the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, is the number one most wanted Nazi still alive and at large. Csatory, who is enjoying his retirement in a quiet corner of the capital, is a former police chief accused of involvement in the murder of 15,700 Jews. I was tipped off about his address and found him living in a nondescript block of flats under a pseudonym. A heavy steel cage door at the entrance to the building prevented me from knocking on his door, so I rang his buzzer. His voice came down the intercom to ask what I wanted. When he heard I was a journalist from the UK he told me he was not interested in talking.

Interestingly within minutes the police arrived. I waited in a car nearby and watched. I could hear Csatory's voice again on the intercom. Unlike me they were invited in.

I could not help but wonder whether the police had been so diligent in responding to complaints about an episode last year, when uniformed neo-Nazi paramilitary groups paraded in central Budapest in commemoration of the SS units that fought alongside Hungarian fascists during World War II.

Hungary's new nationalist odyssey

It was time to leave the capital and visit a massive open air complex at Opusztaszer, a village one hundred miles to the south. It was here last September, at the National Historical Memorial Park, that Orban delivered his now famous 'blood and soil' speech. It was given as he unveiled a 17-metre-high statue of Hungary's mythical Turul bird – a vulture like creature grasping a sword in its talons.

"We came into this world as Hungarians," he said. "Our seven tribal leaders took a blood oath and our holy St Stephen founded the state. The Turul bird is the symbol of our national identity, for all past, present and future generations of Hungarians."

On the face of it, this might have seemed a fairly harmless piece of political flummery – designed, as many of Orban's speeches are, to appeal to his core nationalist constituency. But his words set alarm

bells ringing, because the Turul bird is also a symbol closely identified with the Hungarian fascists of World War II. It was once used in combination with the swastika on the emblem of the Arrow Cross Party.

When I got there, Opusztaszer turned out to be a rather curious place where a reconstruction of a 19th century Hungarian primary school and a farm for rare animal breeds sit cheek by jowl with martial statues of the country's great warrior kings. These include John Hunyadi who, it is said, saved Christendom from the invading Turks by defeating Mehmet II just three years after the conquering sultan had captured Constantinople. But those were the glory days and after the treaty of Trianon, when Hungary was punished for siding with Germany in World War I, the country lost two-thirds of its territory, and one-third of all Hungarians found themselves marooned in foreign countries.

Orban's words last September were therefore carefully chosen. By tapping into Hungary's obsession with past military glories and its collective sense of historical injustice (to say nothing of his grandiose addition to Opusztaszer's looming statuary), Orban was again underscoring his leading role in the country's new nationalist odyssey – a position his critics feel is becoming all too Fuhrer-like for comfort.

On the drive back to the capitol I stopped off at the village of Tatarpuszta, to talk to Erzserbet Csorba who has a very different take on present-day Hungary. Three years ago a wave of racist killings in the area left six dead and many more injured. The victims had only one thing in common, they were all Roma. Erzsebet lost her son Robert and grandson Mate when their house was set ablaze. Robert ran from the burning house with his five-year-old son. Both were gunned down by those waiting outside. Erzserbet found her son near the house.

"He lay on his left side," she told me. "In that moment I was so shocked that I didn't even notice the blood – I tried to wake him up."

The police did not bother coming until the following morning and blamed the fire on faulty wiring, despite being given spent cartridges found at the scene and clothes riddled with bullet holes. "They didn't want to take the bullets we found." Erszerbet explained. Now she is left to bring her three remaining grandchildren up alone with no support from the state.

"Before we had a good relationship with Hungarians," she tells me close to tears, "but nowadays more and more people are becoming racist. I really don't know why the world changed in this way and why we are the hated ones, because we never hurt anybody and now my family is destroyed."

Although arrests have since been made and a trial is underway no-one in the Roma community here expects a positive result. The government subsequently claimed that the killings were the act of extremists, a blip, an aberration - but the truth is that anti-Roma hate crime is increasingly tolerated in Hungary. Another example came in 2011 when the village of Gyongyonspate was occupied by whip-carrying, paramilitary militias. Roma inhabitants, including children, were assaulted and abused. Many families have since fled. The occupation was allowed to continue for two months during which time the government did nothing, claiming it was powerless to act.

Back in Budapest I challenged Zolt Nemeth, the minister of state for foreign affairs, about this incident. "In most societies in Europe there are underclasses ... immigrants," he told me. "If you go to certain segments of your country you can very easily identify which are these terrifying parts, even in London which you wouldn't like to enter, or even New York as well. Gyongyonspata is a bit similar to Bronx. In these situations the government's abilities and scope for action is limited."

But last January, Nemeth's close friend and a co-founder of the ruling Fidesz Party, Zolt Bayer, wrote an article for the pro-Fidesz daily, Magyar Hirlap, that put an altogether more sinister spin on the violence.

Bayer wrote, "A significant part of the Roma is unfit for coexistence. They are not fit to live among people ... These animals shouldn't be allowed to exist. In no way. That needs to be solved, immediately and regardless of the method."

Even in a country slipping towards the far-right, the article caused an outcry, yet Laszlo Kover, the president of the Hungarian parliament, was happy to defend it. "Actually the piece we are talking about is

something that I would have written differently, bearing in mind that I'm a politician and not a journalist or writer. But if we just take the article itself and view it objectively then we could say that it has a lot of statements which are acceptable."

Following a complaint from an independent civic organization called the Otherness Foundation, the NMA (National Media and Infocommunications Authority) did eventually hit the Magyar Hirlap with a fine of 850 Euros (250,000 forints), saying that in publishing Zsolt Bayer's article the paper had broken Hungarian media law by publishing a piece that incited hatred and discrimination and then by failing to take it off its website quickly enough.

However, the relatively modest size of the fine did little to diminish offence the article had already caused. Opponents have also since pointed out that the NMA's Media Council (which issued the censure) is in itself a consequence of Orbán's increasingly tight grip on news reporting because it is made up of Fidesz party loyalists. This, according to award-winning Journalist Balazs Nagy Navarro, combined with a purge of potential critics at the public television station, Magyar Television, has had a dramatic effect on press freedom.

Navarro has led a vigil outside the state-run broadcaster for nearly two years to draw attention to what he calls media manipulation. "They are making daily lies," he told me from a deck chair next to the caravan which has become his home for the duration of his protest. "I would say there is no news outlet, news production or news bulletins in which there is not at least one or two items manipulated."

Navarro points to the blurring out of the images of prominent Fidesz opponents on primetime news, such as a recent episode involving Zoltan Lomnici, the former head of the Hungarian supreme court; and the way TV cameras are often pointed away from the crowds at anti-government protests in order to downplay the scale of opposition. "Last January there was the biggest protest against Orbán in front of the opera house and just as they did with the head of the supreme court they blurred out the people – they blurred out 100,000 people in the heart of Budapest and almost nobody knew there was a huge crowd there."

It has to be said that public demonstrations against Orbán's government are frequent. Many Hungarians – albeit a minority – are deeply concerned at the path the country is taking. The most recent protest opposed yet another change to Hungary's constitution, the fourth in three years, which includes a law making it illegal for homeless people to loiter in public places. In effect it criminalises those who have nowhere else to go – making them liable to stiff fines or imprisonment.

One man who is doing his best for the destitute is Pastor Gabor Ivanyi, who every day provides food and shelter for hundreds of people as well as free schooling for Roma children. I met him, a tall impressive man sporting a magnificent white beard, at the shelter he runs in Budapest's rundown Josefváros quarter just as breakfast was being served to some of the city's most vulnerable. Unsurprisingly he took a dim view of the recent change to the law. "The fact that it took less than 10 minutes to make this law speaks for itself. The constitutional court's role has been reduced to insignificance."

Ivanyi's work has not made him popular with the government. "They get angry when you talk about poverty. They get angry when you fight for the rights of the poor. We keep repeating that the poor are no less valuable than the rich and powerful." He tells me this as we retire to his modest office and sit underneath a signed photograph of the UK's Queen Elizabeth II which has pride of place on the wall. The pastor belongs to a branch of the Methodist church. But last year, following yet another change to Hungary's constitution, the church was excluded from a list of officially recognised religions, a move that has since put Ivanyi's work with the homeless in jeopardy. It is a cruel twist of fate for a man who 20 years ago was Orbán's friend. He even baptised two of the politician's children, back when the prime minister was a liberal opponent of the former pro-Soviet government.

When I ask Ivanyi if he recognises Orbán today, he shakes his head. "He has changed completely since then. We used to have very similar views about dictatorship, legality, constitutionality and basic human rights."

It is almost time for me to leave Hungary and at last the weather has improved. As I stroll outside the parliament building, a stone's throw from my hotel, I notice a procession of about a 200 Roma walking solemnly towards the Danube. I follow them to the spot where Jewish men women and children were murdered by Hungarian fascists in the dying days of World War II. They were ordered to take off their shoes before being roped or handcuffed in twos and threes, shot and thrown into the river. A line of rusting metal shoes is the simple but powerful memorial to this atrocity. Having reached the river the marchers throw flowers into the water. To me it seemed a poignant demonstration of solidarity by one increasingly oppressed ethnic minority for another. These days – when Hungary once again appears to be sleepwalking towards the abyss – such acts are becoming more than symbolic.

Afterword:

On May 2, 2013, the European Parliament's Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs issued a damning report about Hungary's new constitution and centralisation of power. It called for a new mechanism to ensure that all European Union members comply with its values.

On May 5, at a gathering of world Jewish leaders in Budapest, Prime Minister Viktor Orban publicly denounced growing anti-Semitism in his country, but he stopped short of censuring the far-right Jobbik party.

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