The reburial of Imre Nagy [excerpt]
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I go to the funeral with my friends and their group, which included Emil Horn, curator of the Museum of the Hungarian Labour Movement. He is carrying a yellowing issue of the newspaper, *Magyar Nemzet*, dated 1957. It contains an account of his trial, in which he is described as the "Nagy of the countryside". "I lived in a town west of Budapest, near the Austrian border, and was on the local party committee during the revolution. When the Soviet army invaded I stayed to help keep the peace. The rest of the committee, which had run away, returned and denounced me."

We reach Heroes' Square, now a sea of people. Stalls are selling Nagy badges, magazines, books and candles. We join the end of a long queue, several people across, which is tailing around the square. They are all waiting to put flowers on the five coffins displayed on the stage. On the loudspeaker, a man is reading out the names of hundreds of people, who had been hanged for their part in 1956. Each name comes with an age and occupation. Most of them were in their twenties and thirties; most were workers of some kind. This public naming continues for several hours.

Some people explore the past in quieter, more painstaking ways. Akos Kovacs and his wife Erzsabet are a pixie-ish couple whose interest in social history would go almost unnoticed among the eccentric English, but which strikes a singular note in romantic, grandiose Hungary. The walls of their tiny apartment are covered in old kitchen hangings, embroidered with popular proverbs. The rooms were crammed with files full of photographs and documents, the result of their searches.

When I meet them, their main concern is the renovation of war memorials by local communities. After Hungary lost a third of its territories after World War I, the government of the day built memorials across the country. The style of the statuary was ultra-nationalist, featuring stock characters such as the Defiant Soldier or the Suffering Mother, pointing towards the lost region of Erdely (Translyvania). But the attachment of local people to their monuments had a more personal nature. 'For those people in the village, the memorial was just about the people who had belonged to them, and who died in the war,' says Erzsabet.

That didn't stop the postwar Communist government from tampering with the memorials, an unwelcome reminder of a different regime. Akos describes how after 1945, the memorials were considered shameful. They were hidden away or mutilated; the soldiers' swords were removed. But local people looked after them, bringing candles there on All Saints Day to remember the dead. 'In World War I, some 700,000 people were killed. Our aim is to make these things public, so that everyone can know them, see them, talk about them.'

One day, visiting the town of Magyarnandor near the Czechoslovak border, she noticed a war memorial that looked mismatched; a traditional base was topped by a Communist red star. She started asking the locals what had been there before. At first they were silent; then they overcame their fears and started digging. What emerged was a large, round stone crown made of stone. They had hidden it since the Stalinist era, hoping it could return to its rightful place one day.

The hope turned out to be real. The memorial was finally renovated and inaugurated by a proud village in August 1989. 'In a way, this is more important than Nagy's reburial because the whole community was involved,' says Erzsabet. 'They realised that it was important to make the change, and they were no longer afraid of the consequences.'

I return to Magyarnandor with Akos and Erzsabet. While I am there, I talk with Istvan Sandor, the town's Communist chief. Talking about the village's subterfuge, he admits: 'It says something about their mentality at the time; they obviously didn't have much confidence in the future of the system.'

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Jozef Darida is manager of the Bronzonto foundry, which made the vertiginous Stalin statue on Heroes' Square

that was smashed to pieces in the 1956 revolt, and the Lenin figure that had replaced it. Lenin is lying low these days, quite literally; the statue was removed from its plinth just before the Nagy reburial, and is now lying horizontally in the Bronzonto yard while politicians argue about whether to spend money on its renovation – the controversially large sum of seventeen million forints – or just scrap it. Darida remarks drily; 'We've had so many wars in our history, we could make statues our whole lives; there hasn't been a nation defeated so many times.' But in reality the foundry is struggling to survive in the harsh new environment, caught between artists who want to be paid more, and clients who want to pay less. As I leave with my translator, Darida gives up each a minature bust of the Austrian Emperor Franz Joszef: 'We're trying a new technique, to sell to West Germany.' If I came looking for symbolism, I left with a practical lesson in Hungarian economics.

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The Committee for Historical Justice is working with others to identify problems concerning access to information, for both research and policymaking. At meetings, archivists swop stories about how the Communist Party had commandeered papers from every kind of organisation, dating as far back as the nineteenth century, and then closed off access. Now, as public archives become open for the first time, the party is claiming that its papers should be considered private and hence exempt from scrutiny. The historian Istvan Peto explains the problems underlying this apparently reasonable argument: 'In the West, there are alternative sources to the official archives; newspapers, for example. Here the party had a monopoly on information for 40 years, and if it argues for keeping its "own" papers private, it would cover everything, for the whole period.'

In the meantime, the Committee is pushing ahead with plans to help school teachers develop new materials. After a generation of a centralised, ideological approach, there is a chance for a rethink, but for now examiners are leaving out questions about modern history. The textbook covering modern history, Number Four in the series, was already being rewritten. The edition it is replacing, used by a generation of Hungarian schoolchildren, adheres to old party dogma by describing1956 as a 'counterrevolution'.

I want to meet the person responsible for this canonical text and in the small world that is Budapest, it is not hard to get a name. To find her, I must make a long bus ride to a council estate on the fringes of Budapest. I expect to find a hard-bitten party stalwart, but meet instead a disillusioned and well-meaning woman. Agota Joverne Szirtes is happy to talk, and put her side of the story. She had won the commission to write the textbook through competitive exam, back in 1979, because of her training in educational methodology. And it turns out that she will using that knowledge again, working with another writer to produce the new revised edition. She could have done the whole thing herself, but admits wryly, 'It would look a bit strange if they reissued the book with the exact same author and a completely different interpretation.'

How does she feel about the official volte-face, which now allowed for 1956 as a legitimate expression of popular will? Was she angry, upset, or worried? And how did she feel at the time, about the guidelines she had to work with?

'It never occurred to me to write about 1956 as anything other than a counter-revolution,' says Agota. 'In the 1970s, the party had brought us good living conditions and 1956 seemed like a dead end. It was the political and economic crisis that came a few years ago which made people change their minds. The present system seems like the dead end, now.'

After the interview, we sit drinking coffee. Agota's teenage daughter sidles up to me. Her professed goal is to practice her English, but within a sentence or two, she lets slip a cry from a confused heart.

'Do you really think we can be like other countries, and change so much? I cannot believe it; I am frightened.' Then she brings the conversation much closer to home.

'People I know at school ask me, How could your mother write that book? Now everyone thinks they know everything. But it was different then. My mother didn't mean to lie.' ❑