

By Force of Thought: Irregular Memoirs of an Intellectual Journey. By János Kornai. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006. xix; 461 pp. \$40.00.

Leaving John Stuart Mill out of the discussion, there have been very few interesting book-length autobiographies written by economists. To be sure, there are a number of autobiographies on the order of this is how I grew up, this is how I was educated, this is how I got all my good ideas, these are all the people I knew, and these are all the awards I received. None of them of course would ever be suggested reading for a course in biography and autobiography in a department of literature. No, our lot are volumes often written by elder statespeople within the economics profession reflecting back on their life's work, much as Sir Peter Medawar (1979) wrote *Advice to a Young Scientist*. Even such autobiographies as George Stigler's, and Milton and Rose Friedman's, have little literary value, nor do they illuminate much beyond the personal stories of their authors.

In recent years, however, we have been fortunate to have two memoirs, written by economists, that are worth taking seriously because they go beyond looking back on complex lives lived. The first of course is Deirdre McCloskey's (1999) *Crossing: A Memoir*. The second is Franco Modigliani's (2001) *Adventures of an Economist*. The former locates McCloskey's gender confusion and its resolution in modern America, with the transgendered passage inextricably woven with McCloskey's professional career. Modigliani's memoir is an exceptional story of immigration, loss, and reconstruction of self. Each of those narratives transcends a narrow disciplinary focus of an economist's identity as economist.

To those autobiographies we should now add a third. János Kornai has written what he has subtitled *Irregular Memoirs of an Intellectual Journey*, an account of his growing up and coming of age in Hungary--his beginning a life and career first as a journalist, then as an economist, while living and working as a party member in a Communist regime. We have in this volume all of the standard tropes of a coming-of-age story drawn from his autobiographically significant years (Weintraub 2005) as well as a life in late middle age filled with honors, acknowledgments, students, and material comfort. But Kornai's life was not in any way usual. The moves and passages and transitions in his own life were almost always understood, by him, as an attempt to live a moral life in a complex authoritarian society. That he emerged from those years with an international reputation as an economist, an economist who saw clearly and spoke truthfully, is no small measure of the man.

As a scholar-economist of course Kornai is known for his early technical studies of the socialist economies, his fascinating attempt to come to terms with the neoclassical idea of general equilibrium in his much-praised (but apparently little-read) volume *Anti-Equilibrium* (1971), and his later work detailing the actual complexities and structure of the mostly planned Hungarian economy and its Soviet bloc counterparts. Following the collapse of the Soviet system, he began writing on transition economies from a perspective quite unlike that of most Western "experts" who were immediately prepared to redesign national economies on first principles. And now in the post-Soviet period, he has had full access to Western intellectual communities, and was able to construct a scholar's life of half a year in Budapest and half a year at Harvard.

His accounts of becoming a Communist in the immediate postwar period, working as a journalist for nearly a decade until the mid-1950s, participating in the intellectual shift in Hungary that was to lead to the uprising in 1957, and seeing clearly that a research career in economics was what he sought as his own path away from party activism, constitute an astonishing personal tale.

Kornai's account of the revolution and his role in remaining involved yet apart presents moral issues that few of us have ever had to face. Beginning after the period of revolutionary uprising, Kornai worked more and more independently from the official regime as an economist, one who sought to master the tools, techniques, and vocabulary of Western mathematics to understand how to think logically about socialist planning and how to eschew Marxist-Leninist categories in constructing explanations for what he observed. His initial trips to the West, to Cambridge, then to the London School of Economics in the early to mid-1960s, and his return to Hungary with the elements of *Anti-Equilibrium* (1971) (which he wrote to better understand neoclassical theory) in draft are the stuff of an admirable tale of scholarly integrity. His emergent ideas about shortage economies, soft budget constraints, and so on created a rich vocabulary and class of models that could serve to organize a variety of analyses.

But Kornai the memoirist has difficult moral issues to face, particularly associated with his having been an enthusiastic Communist for the decade or so after World War II. On the surface this is a story of his moving away from politics in the 1950s, and the confusing choices of how to live in an informer society. But these are not simple matters to discuss, and Kornai, in this memoir, avoids facile bromides. He needs to explain matters to himself, and we as readers are witness to this moral self-analysis. Clearly it was a difficult book for him to write, for he had to come to terms not only with colleagues who behaved badly but with his own attempts, not always perfectly successful, to live an honest and upright life in a society that was ambivalent about such behaviors.

Whether János Kornai's work will live on in history is not the issue. That he is an economist connects him with us, and that he has led a life of honor and seriousness of mind commends him to us. His book's subtitle, speaking of his "intellectual journey," hardly does this estimable man, or his story, justice.

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