

to the Chinese edition of the “By Force of Thought”

It is a special event for me that my autobiography is going to be published in Shanghai and it is becoming available in the People’s Republic of China. For an author without exception all readers are important, but in my mind -- and I would add: in my emotional world -- there is a special spot reserved for the Chinese reader.

This special spot has developed primarily through personal experiences. In 1985, I was honored by being invited to an international conference that was held on the deck of a tourist boat floating on the Yangtze River. The Chinese colleagues asked the opinions of seven foreign economists about what they think of the Chinese reform. This occasion provided me with the opportunity to set forth my views on the prospects of the reform. Since then, economists dealing with the issues of the reform are still often alluding to the “boat-conference” (*Bashan Lun*).

Not much later, my book titled the *Economics of Shortage* was published in Chinese. In the “classic” socialist system, prior to the reforms, there was a general, chronic and intensive shortage of food, consumer goods, raw materials used in production, machineries and equipment. The train of thought of the book arrived at the conclusion that this was not the result of the erroneous decisions of the planners; rather it was the system itself that produced it, the system which constantly reproduces the shortage economy. My Chinese friends told me that: they can use the reasoning of my book to criticize bureaucratic centralization, the system of the rigid plan directives, and to advocate market-oriented reforms. None of my works has got to the hands of that many readers as this book in China at that time.

Since then, there were barely a few of my writings, which following their Hungarian and English publications, were not translated into Chinese. I have visited China several times, where I was greeted at all occasions with fondness and appreciation. All my trips have provided me with great intellectual experiences, (not to mention those cultural, artistic, touristic and culinary delights, which we were able to partake in thanks to our hosts). I feel that I’m rightfully proud that when visiting many places in China – in universities, in public offices, among students, teachers and government officials – time and time again they stated that: “I’m your student”. Can there be bigger honor and joy for a person who writes and teaches, than hearing these words being uttered? As the reader will learn from the book, friendship means quite a lot for me. It is good to know that I have true friends in China, who care about my fate, who pay attention to my words, whom I can count on – as they know that I’m interested in their fate, I pay attention to their words and they can count on me.

I would like to hope that this book as well will find a response in the People’s Republic of China. I hope that many readers will feel that: there is an intellectual and emotional relationship between him or her and the author.

True, that there is huge difference between China and Hungary. The former has one and a half billion or even more inhabitants, while the latter have only ten million, just as many inhabitants as some big Chinese cities have. China has a history dating back many thousand years, the history of Hungary spans a much shorter period; different traditions, different

customs, different characters in writing – and I could further continue the listing of the differences. And still, there are important connections.

Both China and Hungary have become acquainted with how the socialist system works, which I call in my writings as the “classical” version of the system; the formation that is hallmarked by the names of Stalin in the Soviet Union and Mao Zedong in China. Hungary began reforming the system earlier. At that time, the reform hungry Chinese economists eagerly watched the theories and practical experiences serving as a basis for attempts of the Hungarians. In Hungary, just as well as in numerous other countries of the East-European region, in 1989-1990, after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the process of the transition to a market economy rapidly accelerated – this also signals certain similarities with the Chinese transformations. In my book, which will be in the hands of the Chinese readers, these big historical processes provide the background, in front of which the events of my life unfolded – and in many respects it is a similar historical background as well, in which the reader has lived in the past and will live his or her life in the future.

However, not only in the development of the external circumstances of the individual life, and in the historical experiences can we find similarities. The biography is a highly personal genre. Every person’s life is unique, and differs from anybody else’s. Still, I’m certain that there are experiences in the story of my life, which will be familiar in the eyes of even more than one Chinese intellectual; in my experiences, in my dilemmas and in my choices he or she will recognize his or her own ones.

I was very young, when I set out on a difficult, but exciting journey of an intellectual. Now, when I’m writing these lines, I’m 84 years old; I’m still working from early morning to late night: I carry out research, I publish articles and books, I teach students. In China there is an ancient tradition of respect towards the elderly, (it is much more common there, than in my home country...) -- perhaps it deserves attention from the reader that my autobiography covers the experiences of three quarters of a century.

I had an adventurous life. There was a period in it, when I was in deadly dangers and my life was hanging by a thread – and a period, when peace and serenity surrounded me. There was a time, when I was persecuted, threatened, fear and distress filled my heart – and there were times, when I was awarded and I received recognition. The period of naïve faith and unconditional enthusiasm was replaced by doubt, and after that it was followed by the period of disappointment; later I formed new beliefs, by this time in a less naïve manner with a more thought-out moderation. The initial half-knowledge and false ideologies were followed by the relearning of science and by the gathering of new and more reliable knowledge.

The boat of my life proceeded at times on calm waters and at times under storms. There were several occasions when it almost ran aground. Just now the sea is stormy again. Collegium Budapest was closed, this great international research institution, in which I had worked in for twenty years from the first day of the inception of the institution to its last day. Corvinus University of Budapest offered me a new position, where I can continue working and teaching. It is not easy to start a new life again – but I will try.

Amidst the tumbling in the storms I could still find my way, because I had and I have a compass that orients me.

I cannot claim that ever since I can remember I had the same political views. As it will become clear in the book, my political beliefs between 1953 and 1957 went through a radical, I could say through a dramatic change. Still, all along I had such *fundamental values, ethical principles*, which are found one layer deeper than a current political stance and which define my thinking. I had changed my political beliefs, when I shockingly realized that those, whose guidance I blindly trusted, carried out activities ruthlessly violating and opposing exactly the fundamental ethical principles of mine.

Which are these fundamental values, to which I strove to remain loyal in the past and wish to insist on in the future as well?

If it is possible at all to talk about a ranking, then I would put at the first place the idea of *freedom*, the protection of human rights. Even in my first work, in my book titled *Overcentralization in Economic Administration*, I was concerned with the question of autonomous decision: why does the overbearing central government chip in everything even at the levels of the smallest details, why doesn't it leave the necessary independence for the producing firms? When – as I mentioned – I was writing about the shortage economy, I did not consider that as a narrowly economic problem either. Shortage limits the possibility of the individual's choice; it forces him or her to act in a way in which he or she would have never acted voluntarily. Since then that wish returns with great emphasis in my works: let the scope of the individual's decision be as wide as possible: he or she should choose between products and services, between disciplines of learning and professions, between alternative careers, between employers, between various groups of friends, between ideas, ideologies and beliefs, as freely as possible.

On my path the notion of *solidarity* has accompanied me all along. Many things belong here. As luck had it, I was born into a well-off and erudite family, and yet, I sympathize with those, who were born into a lower class, and grew up under difficult circumstances. Except for war times, I have never starved, and I have never suffered because of serious financial problems, still at least I try to think about what it means to be poor. During the long decades my opinion has changed about what is needed to be done towards the lifting-up of those in difficult circumstances – but the sense remained constant in me that I have the duty of working on this.

A constant and great value to me is the adherence to the service to the *homeland*. When the Hungarian edition of my autobiography was introduced, Péter Nádas, one of the greatest figures of the contemporary Hungarian belles-lettres offered this characterization of me: "Hungarian patriot". I consider these words as great recognition. I'm of Jewish decent, my father and my brother were killed during the persecution, and my life was in danger as well. Many of those, who had gone through similarly bitter experiences, left the country. Even later, newer and newer emigrational waves followed. After the defeat of the 1956 revolution, only in a few weeks, two and a half percent of the inhabitants of Hungary left the country. Decades after these, when cracks appeared in the walls and even later, when the walls came crumbling down, many sought a financially easier life in the richer countries. The "brain drain" – the attraction of the developed world that offers better opportunities for the best minds of the poorer countries – was activated. I understand those, who are seeking prosperity somewhere else, outside of their homeland – but for myself I chose another path. I have spent a lot of time abroad, I taught for 18 years at Harvard University, the premier university of the USA. But time and time again, I returned to Hungary. I remained a Hungarian citizen all along. But it not only the place of residence and the legal ties that matter; at least as important what kind of identity one feels. I'm Hungarian. Still, while I am proud of my homeland, but I

have never felt that I would be above the sons of any nations. I'm free of all racist ideologies, and prejudice against people with different faces and color of the skin. I strongly condemn malignant nationalism. I consider myself as a "cosmopolitan", a European, a Hungarian and a Jew, all at once. This is one of those ethical principles, which amidst the turns of fate remained constant in my values.

My thoughts on economics has changed significantly (I hope, they evolved towards the right direction). Still, even in this area there is constancy. Ever since I once encountered within myself a bitter disappointment in an orthodox ideology that was stuck in the web of its own faults, I have developed in myself a healthy dose of *doubt*.. I do not accept any thoughts blindly. Anyone says anything, regardless how high position he or she is in, or how high his or her authority is, I ask myself: is it true what I'm hearing? Perhaps it is true – or he or she might be wrong? If a theoretical suspicion evolves in me, I try to confront the theory with reality, and not only with statistical data (this type of confronting is quite important as well), but also with everyday experiences. This is one of the most important defenses against the doctrinaire thinking, against dogmas.

During my long life my living conditions and my expressed views about the daily issues has changed many times and in significant ways, but – I hope others would see the same way as well – my human behavior has not changed fundamentally; I have always tried to adhere to the same behavioral rules that I specified for myself. One of the foremost commands is: one must tell and write the *truth*. One must not lie. And if for whatever reason I do not tell the *entire* truth, then it torments me to know that even though what I said is true, one part of the truth remained in me, stayed untold. The reader will find some thoughts regarding this in my autobiography.

The traumatic historical experiences both in China and in Hungary discredited the notion of "self-criticism". In our countries, people were forced with indignity, or even with harsh physical violence, with torture to offer false self-accusations. But no matter how much the word was discredited, still there is a need for *critical self-examination*. Not because of external influence, rather because of conscience or because of the command of intellectual sobering, such self-examination has taken place inside of me several times. I tried to face the actions of the earlier periods of my life and the ideologies guiding my actions. If I felt that it is necessary, then I broke away from them. The worst thing one can do to himself or herself in these shaken moments is self-pity, or exaggerated caution, with which he or she tries to carry over as many faulty views from the past as possible. If you look into the mirror to see your own face, then do not light a dim light in which you can only see the features of your face in a blur. Let the sunshine in – as the words of the American song suggest, when the American youth began to wake up from the nightmares of bad habits and misguided traditions.

I thank to all, who helped this current, new meeting with the Chinese readers. I would like to express my gratitude to the publisher, Shanghai People's Press for undertaking the publishing of my book, and to Professor An Jia, who worked on the translation of my work with great devotion. I wait with great intellectual excitement for the responses arriving from China.

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