

GENIUS LOCI

LASZLOVSZKY 60

edited by
Dóra Mérai
and

Ágnes Drosztmér, Kyra Lyublyanovics,
Judith Rasson, Zsuzsanna Papp Reed,
András Vadas, Csilla Zatykó



ARCHAEOLINGUA

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Nádor 20 Capriccio

JÁNOS M. BAK*

(Since Jóska is interested in the CEU neighborhood's history, this extended version of my memories of an old house may be appropriate here...)

The big old house on the corner of Nádor and Arany János street has been known to me since childhood. There was a barber-shop—and there still is one—in which Vuja Gyuri bácsi (“uncle”) cut my childhood hair to school-boy size. He was the barber of my father, but also a trade-unionist comrade of his. Therefore, in late October 1944 it was reasonable to ask Uncle Gyuri to give my father asylum, no longer protected in the textile mill where we had spent some months before. The factory was declared a war-supplier and stood under control of a military commander, who could not care less whether the director was a “Jew” as long as production of uniforms was going well. But after the Arrowcross take-over (October 15) this was no longer a safe place. So, Dr Bak moved into Comrade Vuja’s pantry on the second floor of Nádor 20, a room of less than 6 square meters with a kind of bed on the top shelf. One of the important precautions in order not to be detected was to have to coordinate the use of the loo and pull only a few times a day, appropriate for one inhabitant. It was risky enough not to join the rest of the people in the air-raid cellar, but that was put down to the peculiarities of Uncle Gyuri. (Such as his once having operated on his hemorrhoids himself, not wanting to see a doctor.) Of course, neither of them knew that several tenants of the house—all suspicious of the other—were also hiding persecuted persons, Jews and army deserters.

In mid-December, the situation in the pantry became even more precarious. My mother and I had been living in various sublet rooms as “Tran-

sylvanian refugees,” with proper documents based, of course, on originally fake ones. Transylvania was by that time under Soviet and Romanian control. However, we had to change rooms frequently so as not to be recognized, and once, because a friend of mine committed the mistake of telling his mother my conspiratorial address, we had to leave in a hurry. (I had a number of very useful false documents for those in hiding or in the so-called resistance.) When our landlady told us that “a Jewess was looking for you,” we, properly surprised, packed our minimal property and left before a Nazi patrol arrived to check on the Transylvanians with Jewish friends. By that time, my mother had had enough of the cat-and-mouse play and wanted to join her husband. In the 6-square-meter pantry with one more person’s bodily needs to coordinate...

Several weeks passed in these inhuman conditions, then my parents had had enough of it and decided to leave and, however dangerous, find some other hiding place. Nádor 20 had an old-fashioned huge door for carts and a small one for persons. The latter had a peep hole. Around noon on January 14, 1945, Dr. and Mrs. Bak looked out the peephole and saw first a German soldier run from left to right, and a few minutes later a member of the 2nd Ukrainian front of the Red Army followed. They were liberated. End of Act one.

Act two. In early February, I was told that György Heltai, an old friend of my father’s with whom he had marched home from the bend of the Don when the 2nd Hungarian Army, in which they were labor conscripts, was as good as annihilated by Soviet forces, is the secretary of the inner-fifth district cell of the Hungarian Communist Party. Its office was on the first floor of Nádor 20, several rooms in a corner flat with a view of both Nádor and Arany János streets. Heltai had been member of the underground Communist

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Party, an international lawyer by trade. (He was later jailed in the Rajk trial and served as the de facto foreign minister of the revolutionary government of Imre Nagy in 1956, then emigrated and finally taught history in the United States.) His wife, Ágnes Lányi, daughter of the well-known translator of operas and music critic Viktor, a friend of mine for some time, was the “propagandist” of that cell. She was an artist in graphic and other media. I liked to draw and paint, so she invited me to do posters and signs for the Party. Sometime later we set up the, perhaps first, “wall-newspaper” (*faliújság*, Russian *stengazeta*, best known in Chinese as *datsebao*) in Budapest. It was nailed to the building palisade of the Soviet war memorial on Szabadság tér, just a corner or two from Nádor 20, and had, among other items, a map showing the advance of the Allied troops towards Berlin. In March, I was recommended by

Heltai for Party membership and accepted. Alas, soon the central command ordered that young party members should go to work in the youth movement of the Communist Party, “disguised” as the Hungarian Democratic Alliance of Youth (MADISZ). In the summer of ‘45 I had to leave Nádor 20 for a post in that organization.

But before that: around May 1, 1945, Ágnes and I, and our helpers, were busily painting signs to be carried at the “First Free Mayday” when Uncle Vuja (still member of the Social Democrats) showed up in the office with presents for Gyuri, Ági and me. They were red carnations—made out of human hair... (Ági was almost sick touching it.) End of story.

It was exactly 50 years later that I came regularly to pass Nádor 20 on my way to CEU or the Terv espresso or—when in a spending mood—to the Pomo d’Oro in Arany János utca.