



ONIONS, HOMESTEADS AND INGRATITUDE: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF A POPULIST-SOCIALIST INTELLECTUAL

Ferenc Erdei 1910 – 1971; politikai életrajz
by Tibor Huszár, Budapest, Corvina Kiadó, 2012

Reviewed by Chris Hann

Introduction

When I went to Hungary in 1975 to begin dissertation research on socialist transformations of rural economy, my advisers at the Ethnological Research Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences soon drew the name of Ferenc Erdei to my attention. He was important, I was assured, not merely because his works in the genre of *szociográfia* displayed intimate knowledge of those regions of the Great Plain where I wanted to carry out field work, but also because of his theoretical insights into pre-socialist Hungarian society and his espousal of cooperatives as a solution to the problems of long-term economic backwardness. It took quite some time before I was able to read and appreciate the books in question, and to realise the significance of Erdei's contributions not only as a scholar but also as a politician and public intellectual. Eventually, Erdei became a key figure in my early publications and his ghost came back to haunt me when I revisited the village of my original study to investigate postsocialist changes. The developments of the last two decades have unravelled a great deal of what Ferenc Erdei fought to accomplish in the Hungarian countryside. In particular, the political developments of recent years must cause him to turn in his grave. Against this background, Tibor Huszár's biography could not be more timely. It is an account of a lost world, of commitments, compromises, and values that are alien to the majority of Hungarians today, but which helped to transform the lives of millions of citizens in the later decades of socialism.

Huszár is a distinguished sociologist, well known for his work on the elites of the socialist era, including János Kádár himself and the influential left-liberal critic of Kádár's system, István Bibó. He encountered Erdei personally and was evidently captivated. As a result, this book is basically a labour of love, well produced (including numerous fine photographs) and extremely well documented on the basis of numerous extended interviews with contemporaries and private as well as publicly available archival sources. Yet Huszár does not sanitize the career of his hero. Erdei had many shortcomings during several stints as a government minister between 1944 and 1956. As a leader of the National Peasant Party, he was little more than a stooge for the communists, who found it more convenient to keep him as a loyal ally than allow him to follow his communist convictions by formally joining the Hungarian Workers' Party and its successor. Erdei was close to Imre Nagy, joined his inner cabinet at the climax of the 1956 revolution, and came very close to paying for this stance with his life. However, Kádár secured his release after several uncertain weeks in Soviet detention, presumably because Erdei's expertise was considered essential for the smooth implementation of the collectivization of





agriculture. Though he did not hold ministerial office again, right down to his early death from cancer in 1971 Erdei was a most active agent in the working out of Kádár's social compromise. This earned him the scorn of those who rejected that system in its entirety, especially after Kádár's death and the demise of socialism. Erdei was seen as a man who betrayed his own early progressive ideals, whereas István Bibó, a close friend from his university years onwards, won posthumous recognition for distancing himself from the Party and struggling in quasi-underground opposition to "tell truth to power" by developing ideas of a "third way" between capitalism and socialism. Yet Huszár makes it plain that the massive transformation of living standards in rural Hungary in the later years of the Kádár system owed a great deal to the battles fought both openly and covertly by Ferenc Erdei. In his own way, Erdei remained unflinchingly loyal to his peasant constituents. In the whole of the twentieth century, he was arguably their most articulate and successful spokesman.

Life and Work

Ferenc Erdei was born in Makó, east of Szeged, in the southern Great Plain, into a family which was at once thoroughly peasant and yet imbued with urban traditions and bourgeois aspirations (particularly on the maternal side, for his father's father came from the landless stratum classified by ethnographers as *zsellér-kubikus*, and by some socialists as rural proletariat). They resided alternately in the town and on the distant homestead outside the settlement, the *tanya* which gave them more convenient access to their small plots. The region was already specialized in the production of onions as a cash crop. Ferenc was a bright schoolboy and at some level deeply marked at an early age by Calvinist Christianity. He entered the Ferenc József University in Szeged in 1929 to study law. Here he participated in the activities of the Gábor Bethlen Circle, the Miklós Bartha Society, and other student groupings. He responded enthusiastically to poet Attila József's 1930 angry declaration (in a manifesto written with Dániel Fábian) that the lay at the heart of all the country's social, economic and cultural woes. However, Erdei's roots in Makó ensured that, unlike others at the university with a more bourgeois background, he was never tempted to romanticise a lost rural idyll. Moreover, unlike some others who engaged in populist politics in these years, there was no tradition of anti-Semitism in the Erdei family.

Huszár pays close attention to Erdei's first publications and unpublished notes from his student years, which reveal the lifelong ambiguities of his stance. The unique "rural culture" (*falusi műveltség*) of the Hungarian peasant was palpably disappearing through processes of "embourgeoisement" (*polgárosodás*), of the kind exemplified by the entrepreneurial onion growers of Makó. The spread of a basically urban form of civilization in the form of capitalist farmers was progressive, and yet it was at the same time unwelcome, since it precluded the possibility of a distinctively peasant path of *civilizálódás* or *kulturálódás*. Erdei eventually found a reconciliation of these tensions in the form of cooperatives, which he became convinced would open a way toward non-capitalist modernization and rescue the rural masses from their poverty without compelling them to give up their unique Hungarian identity.





In the great cleavage which was consolidated during the 1930s between the *népi* (populist) movement and the *urbánus* elites of the capital, Erdei identified unambiguously with the radicals of the populist movement. He read and was deeply impressed by Lenin (not Marx, who was barely available to Hungarian readers at this time), as well as foreign and Hungarian scholarship in economics and rural sociology, but his allegiance was always to the peasants of Makó. After obtaining his degree, he returned home to work for the local onion producers' cooperative. They had been commercially successful in exporting their product as far afield as France. The cooperative funded a trip by Erdei in 1935 to inspect rural developments in Germany and Holland. These experiences influenced his first sociographic investigations, which were devoted to Királyhegyes (a settlement adjacent to Makó). This in turn led to a commission to write a volume for a new series of the Athenaeum publishing house called *Magyarország felfedezése* ("Discovering Hungary"), which soon became the gold standard of the populist movement. This volume (*Futóhomok* - "Drifting Sand") was based on Erdei's first-hand observations of contemporary conditions in the Danube-Tisza interfluvium. The young author traversed the region on a motorbike in the summer of 1937, lodging with Calvinist ministers, closely surveyed by the gendarmes wherever he went. The publication of this volume later that same year brought immediate national recognition. Erdei began to spend more time in Budapest (even the populists gathered in a coffee house in downtown Pest). He forged close links to a coterie of intellectuals, many of whom went on to become influential figures under socialism, in the framework of a social movement known as the March Front. In 1938, together with other leaders, he was sentenced to two months imprisonment for "slandering the nation" (*nemzetrágmazás*). After the demise of the Front, Erdei responded to the deteriorating political climate by establishing the National Peasant Party in 1939.

Following a failed marriage in Makó, Erdei spent much of the Second World War in rural retreat on a *tanya* close to the village of Szigetszentmiklós, nearer to the capital than to the family home. Still under the close monitoring of the gendarmerie, he farmed with his father and brother Sándor. Photographs show a supremely fit young man at work ploughing and plastering adobe walls. But this homestead was also equipped with a small library and it was during these years that Erdei completed in quick succession the volumes for which he is best known as a scholar: *Hungarian Town*, *Hungarian Village*, *Hungarian Peasant Society* and *Hungarian Tanyas*. Tibor Huszár shows that the principal intellectual influence on Erdei during these years was the historian István Hajnal. All of these books were deeply imprinted by Erdei's own biography in Makó; notwithstanding the generalising titles, the Makó variant of the *civis* tradition of the Great Hungarian Plain was hardly valid for all parts of the Plain, let alone the rest of the country; but this did not diminish the force of Erdei's vision. *Hungarian Peasant Society* (1942) is the volume that has stood the test of time best. It offered in 170 pages both an original theoretical overview and a detailed analysis of the crisis in the rural sector and its impact on different segments of the peasantry, including the "peasant-workers" (see Swain 1992 for a summary in English). While writing these books, Erdei remained active politically and he delivered a powerful pro-communist speech at the famous oppositional summer rally at Balatonszárszó in 1943. When the war drew to an end, he was working on a comprehensive





synthesis of Hungarian society in the inter-war decades which emphasized its dualistic character (this manuscript was only published in 1976). According to Erdei's diagnosis, antiquated notions of rank had continued to stymie the emergence of a bourgeois society long after the abolition of serfdom, and the principal representatives of modernity were not ethnic Hungarians at all but Germans and Jews. By now, his sympathies for the communist cause had crystallized. Breaking through the front lines, Ferenc Erdei began his formal political career as Minister of the Interior in December 1944, in the provisional government formed in the eastern zone, which was already controlled by the Red Army. He was still only thirty-four years old.

In this biography of almost 500 pages, Tibor Huszár devotes relatively little space to Erdei's achievements as a minister and deputy leader of the National Peasant Party in the early socialist era. His second marriage, to a committed communist who participated alongside him in celebrated sociographic team research in Nagykőrös, was a success, but the Erdeis experienced the horrors of the Rákosi regime close-up (notably the bloody suicide of their immediate neighbour Sándor Zöld in 1951). The political accomplishments of these years were undistinguished and recognized as such by Erdei himself later on. Huszár makes some excuses for Erdei's shortcomings at the Ministry of Agriculture in the Rákosi years, pointing out that implementation of the Party's policy of forced deliveries was in fact the responsibility of the Ministry of the Interior. There is no doubt that Erdei's sympathies lay not with the hardliners but with Imre Nagy, in whose first government he continued to serve as Minister of Agriculture.

Following the debacle of 1956, Erdei was obliged to concentrate more on cultivating his profile as a scientist and Academician. In a Preface to the third edition of *Drifting Sand*, he laconically noted the turbulent transformations of the previous two decades and corrected his original formulation implying the absence of class conflict in some forms of rural modernization, such as that of Kiskőrös, for the sake of communist political correctness. Much more importantly, Erdei played a key role in ensuring that Lajos Fehér and like-minded communist leaders with a pragmatic grasp of prevailing social relations in the villages were able to consolidate policies designed to enlist the acquiescence of the wealthier strata of the peasantry in the implementation of collectivization (cf. Varga 2001). The alternative at the time was simply to dispossess them as the class enemy. This was in fact the course advocated by Imre Dögei (a communist of rural proletarian descent on both sides, summed up by Huszár on page 389 as a man of "modest capabilities") and it was initially the strategy favoured by Kádár himself, who had little empathy with peasants. A long drawn out battle ensued, but in the early 1960s even the former *kuláks* (middle and wealthy peasants) were eventually welcomed as members of the new producers' cooperatives. Many progressed quickly to positions of leadership and responsibility in the new institutional framework. Thanks to the household plot and the decentralising incentives introduced with the 1968 economic reforms, the rural sector as a whole benefited enormously and came to exemplify the successes of Kádár's "market socialism". By the 1970s, even the inhabitants of relatively backward *tanya*-dominated communities, such as the one I investigated in Tázlár, mid-way between the Danube and Tisza in the region of drifting sand, were rapidly modernising their houses. On the basis of their own peasant labour, they participated in the consumer boom that eventually gave Kádár's social compromise a high degree of legitimacy in the eyes of most Hungarians (Hann 1980).





It is sad to note that Ferenc Erdei died in 1971, before the fruits of his endeavours, a uniquely synthetic populist-socialist *civilizálódás* of rural Hungary, became apparent in the 1970s and 1980s. Fascinating digressions and engaging personal reminiscences in the form of interview transcripts assume more prominence in the last chapters of this rich biography. It seems that Erdei and his family experienced more peace and contentment in these years, but his schedule remained punishing: as Director of a very productive research institute in agrarian economics, as General Secretary of the Patriotic People's Front, and as General Secretary (Vice-President) of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Ferenc Erdei was constantly in the public eye. Yet he somehow found the time (when already seriously ill) to contribute a volume to a revival of the *Discovering Hungary* series. This last monograph *Town and Country* was appropriately devoted to a reassessment of the evolving tight links between urban and rural sectors in his native region. Much of the work was grounded in the personal links which he built up with countless rural politicians and chairmen of the new producers' cooperatives. He visited these new provincial leaders to monitor local developments first-hand and helped them whenever he could behind the scenes in the capital. They arrived in droves for his funeral on 15 May 1971 in Makó, when the entire town came to a standstill and all the church bells pealed. The graveside speech of Lajos Fehér on behalf of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party was followed (among several others) by those of the President of the Academy of Science and the Calvinist Bishop. István Bibó was not allowed to make a speech, but he travelled privately by train and bus from Budapest to pay his last respects to his old friend.

Postscript

I submitted the above review to the *Hungarian Quarterly* in summer 2013, but I did not receive an answer. This did not surprise me. This journal (for which I worked as a language editor in 1979-80, when it was known as the *New Hungarian Quarterly*) maintained a high-quality coverage of cultural and social affairs in Hungary during the first two decades after socialism. However, since the recent departure of the long-serving editorial team, publication has become irregular and the standard has dropped significantly. Why would the new editors of a state-subsidised magazine wish to have anything to do with an unsolicited review of a biography which provides a welter of solid evidence to salvage the reputation of a left-leaning intellectual-politician of the previous era? For some conservative Hungarians, Ferenc Erdei still represents the worst kind of fellow-traveller.

Tibor Huszár devotes hardly any space to Erdei's posthumous reputation.¹ His major works were republished in the years after his death, when his ideas and conceptualization of historical backwardness influenced a new generation of Eastern European sociologists (among them Iván Szelényi and Piotr Sztompka, who made them known to wider English-speaking readerships). Erdei's star had fallen by the time I published a short tribute soon after the collapse of communist power (Hann 1995). When I visited Makó in the early 1990s, municipal officials seemed uncomfortable in discussing Erdei's local image and standing. However, at least in his hometown his aura could not be dispelled so easily. There is now a centrally located bust, his family home can be visited, squares and schools bear his name, and his image adorns the entrance to a wonderful building known as the Onion





House, built in the late 1990s on the site of an original edifice that Erdei himself helped to inaugurate in 1935. It is the principal *művelődés* institution of the town, a culture house with a difference, because the architecture of Imre Makovecz highlights the centrality of onions as a cash crop to the modern history and *műveltség* of this corner of the Great Plain.

Little in Hungary is black or white nowadays, my friends often remind me. Makó sends a FIDESZ representative to parliament in Budapest, but the Socialist Party has a majority on the local council. This council has voted recently to transfer most of the town's schools to church control, thus reversing the action of Erdei's near contemporary and fellow-fellow-traveller Gyula Ortutay, the Minister of Education who nationalized all religious schools in 1949. This policy reversal is usually associated with FIDESZ, which has made it possible, yet in Makó it has been implemented by the socialists. The reason appears to be that the socialists consider that schools will have more room to manoeuvre and freedom to appoint the teachers they wish if they are in church hands than if they are regulated by new secular organs and liable to politically-motivated interventions. As a result, if Ferenc Erdei were growing up in Makó today, he would again be exposed at an early age to the teachings of the Reformed Church.

It is hard not to share Tibor Huszár's view that Ferenc Erdei's greatest achievements had little to do with the years when he held high office. Rather, the highlights came *before* he was a minister, notably in the field of sociography, and *after* he was a minister, when he worked tirelessly (mostly behind the scenes) to ensure that Hungarian collectivization would not repeat the mistakes of the Soviet prototype. Overall, collective farms in Hungary did work impressively well (Swain 1985). And even if the economic balance was not optimal in every respect, collectivization was crucial in the social incorporation of millions of rural Hungarians into a truly national community for the first time. However, it was too much to expect the beneficiaries and their descendants to show gratitude for measures which ran against the grain of their world view, which was based on the superiority of private property. Erdei's people, the post-peasants of non-cosmopolitan Hungary, vote overwhelmingly for FIDESZ, or for a party even further to the right. Ferenc Erdei would have no difficulty in understanding this. He would seek to counter, just as he countered the policies of the Independent Smallholders' Party in the 1940s, by pointing to the need for cooperatives to reconcile efficiency with equity and solve collective action problems. He would deplore the fact that, compared to the gains made in the later Kádár era, and in spite of the benefits which accrue to some farmers through EU accession, the gulf between town and countryside has widened significantly in recent years, along with social inequalities generally.

There are still places outside Makó where the name of Ferenc Erdei is still held in high esteem. I visited one of them in August 2013. True, Ópusztaszer is not very far away, in the same county of Csongrád, but this setting is very different: the country's *National Heritage Park*, a celebration of Magyar history on the site where the tribal chiefs allegedly conferred in 896 after taking possession of their homeland in the Carpathian Basin. How is it possible that a plaque depicting Erdei, sentenced in 1938 for slandering his nation, should greet the visitor at the entrance to this national shrine? The answer is that he was the multi-tasking public intellectual who chaired the committee which imaginatively launched this project in the late 1960s. The main purpose was to provide a new home for Árpád Feszty's panorama painting





of the original bloody “home-taking”, a canvas which had been a central feature of the millennial celebrations in 1896. The Ópusztaszer project was a clear indication of how socialists were looking to well-known symbols to unite the nation as the Kádár system took root. Restoration of Feszty’s *körkép* took many years and the complex was not opened until 1995 - appropriately enough under the socialist-led government of Gyula Horn. However, such places lend themselves more readily to the rhetoric of right-leaning politicians. The speech made here in September 2012 by FIDESZ Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, after unveiling a column supporting the totemic *turul* bird, attracted international attention for its aggressive assertion that “blood and soil” forge all ethnic Hungarians into a unique community.

Yet, once again, not everything in Hungary is what it appears to be. Alongside the fierce patriotism of the panorama painting, entertaining displays of nomadic equestrianism, and history exhibits which culminate in the heroism of the “kids of 1956”, ecological and non-nationalist educational goals are also prominent at Ópusztaszer. Ferenc Erdei’s name marks a nature trail and the large biosphere reserve helps to place the turbulent human history of this region in a wider perspective. Ethnographers from the University of Szeged have built up an impressive skansen representing conditions in the vicinity of Szeged in the immediate pre-socialist generations. One exhibit is an elementary school created especially to meet the needs of *tanya* children, i.e. those who lived all year round on the isolated homestead and not just seasonally, as emphasized in Erdei’s settlement theories. Just around the corner from this school, Erdei would be astounded to discover at the centre of the skansen the reconstructed house and yard of a Makó onion grower. Its unnamed, long-dead owner is accurately described as a progressive modernizer, but unsurprisingly there is no reference here to Erdei’s theory of embourgeoisement. After all, those entrepreneurial onion growers were eventually obliged to move on from being members of a voluntary, small-scale cooperative to join large-scale collective farms – not at all the path that Erdei had in mind for them when the onion cooperative of Makó gave him his first job in 1935.

Visiting Ópusztaszer shortly after reading Tibor Huszár’s book left me with some hope that Ferenc Erdei can now receive the recognition he deserves at the national level, and not merely in his hometown. The complexities of his life reflect the vicissitudes of the nation in Hungary’s painful, century-long transition from a backward agrarian society determined to share the running of a vast multi-ethnic empire to a small and relatively homogenous nation-state within the EU, whose norms it has struggled in recent years to observe. Like a few other distinguished Hungarians who experienced this extraordinary transition very directly in their life-histories (perhaps most notably Karl Polanyi, though in many respects the two lives could hardly have been more different), Ferenc Erdei proved that it is possible to feel close ties to the soil as one’s patrimony, and yet lean to the left of the political spectrum; to value one’s national identity and historical traditions very profoundly, and yet attach equal value to modern science, technologies and complex institutions such as collective farms, provided that these are put to use to ease and enhance the lives of the rural masses.

Notes

¹ For more information about the activities of the Ferenc Erdei Association and many other matters, see Gyuris (2010).





This work, prepared independently of Huszár's biography, complements it by providing a full chronology of Erdei's life and significant posthumous events down to 2007, along with a meticulous bibliography of writings by and about Erdei. For further evidence of continued interest and respect for Erdei's manifold accomplishments around the centenary of his birth, see the collections edited by Gyula Varga in 2010 and 2011 (published in Szeged and Makó respectively). I thank László Kürti and Nigel Swain for drawing these works to my attention, after I had completed this review.

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ÖSSZEFOGLALÓK ABSTRACTS

