

Mária Márkus

ON THE DEATH OF MY FRIEND

For almost forty years András Hegedüs has been one of my closest friends. It is thus the loss of a friend that I mourn and so my grief is a private affair, and is of no concern to anyone else.

András Hegedüs was, however, a public figure and not just on the political arena. He was also one of the most significant Hungarian sociologists. In this context, his loss is already a public affair, or at least a cause for common sorrow for the community of sociologists. I am sure that this sorrow and feeling of a genuine loss is shared by many, quite independently of their attitudes towards András as a former politician, a person, or even independently of their sympathy towards the kind of sociology he pursued.

It was my privilege for twenty odd years to work with him in close collaboration and also for many years to be his colleague at the Institute of Sociology of which he was the first director.

There is no doubt that the establishment of institutionalised sociology in Hungary is directly linked to his name. By saying that, I don't wish to suggest that without András Hegedüs, some sort of institutional form of sociological research, like the Institute of Sociology (originally the "Research Group") would not have ultimately emerged. After all, at that point in time, there were many people, scattered across different academic and other institutions, who were interested in sociology or who were already engaged in various sociological investigations. Also, the "rehabilitation" of sociology was not a specifically Hungarian phenomenon or achievement, but was taking place gradually in all Central East-European countries and in the former Soviet Union as an expression of the new "Zeitgeist".

Nevertheless, while the establishment of an institution for sociological research cannot be ascribed to Hegedüs alone, it was to a large extent due to his effort that the Sociological Research Group came into being. It was he, who obtained permission for its establishment "in exchange" for the ministerial position of Director of the Central Office of Statistics, originally offered to him. Not that it was a particular sacrifice on his part, since at this stage he has already decided never to return to politics and the position on offer was undoubtedly a political one. Yet, it was a step, which - as it was clear for everyone involved - meant giving up a relatively stable position of high prestige for an uncertain future.

More importantly, at this point in time, he has not just attempted to break with his political past, but also began to critically re-examine this past. Not just his own, personal, past and his own role, but also the past of the idea, the movement, and later the system, in the "shadow" of which his own thinking has been initially formed. To accomplish this task, however, he needed to create also a formal distance from the establishment, which he hoped to achieve by entering Academia.

In this sense, it was the result of the confluence of a number of factors that it was Hegedüs, who ultimately established the Institute of Sociology and became its first director.

What kind of director he was, however, is an altogether different question. What he did in his position, what kind of people he attempted to bring together in this new institution was not incidental. His initial recruitment policy was characterised by two basic principles. On the one hand, he attempted to bring into the Institute people, who have already been engaged in some sort of sociological investigation within various institutions but often in an environment not conducive, or even hostile, to this type of activities. On the other hand, he attempted to employ, or at least to connect to the Institute's activities persons, with similar interest who, for various political reasons, were excluded from the academic life and whom no other academic institution was prepared to offer employment.

These two principles were supplemented by yet another one, rooted perhaps in Hegedüs' own life experience: he always tried to support gifted young people with various social handicaps, especially those of peasant background.

This naturally resulted in quite a mixed group, consisting of people from various backgrounds, with various pasts, various education, and possessing quite different kinds of knowledge and gaps in their knowledge not less different. This to some extent defined the nature and the scope of the Institute's initial research and also influenced its very character and its *modus operandi*.

One could ask: how successful was Hegedüs as a director; did he succeed to forge a "school" or to unify this heterogeneous group around one particular vision of sociology?

This is neither the place nor occasion to discuss the justification for, or the role of, "schools" in the social sciences today. Nor is it possible to evaluate Hegedüs' role in some sort of an "objective" way. In this respect, one's judgment is necessarily coloured by one's personal beliefs and experiences. What, however, can and ought to be said here is that at this point of time, the independence of thought and intellectual autonomy became for him of paramount importance and he was anxious to realise it not just in his own work but also in his relationships with others. It is thus partly due to this commitment that, as the Institute's director, he strived to bring together - both on personal and professional level - this extremely mixed group of people in such a way that the previously mentioned heterogeneity of their knowledge, interests and opinions would not be lost in the process.

This was, in my opinion, a splendid endeavour and also - at least so it seemed at the time - a successful one. As members of the Institute, we tried to learn and to engage in sociological research together but in a way that allowed all of us, at the same time, to follow our own interests and realise our own preferences.

This endeavour, however, was made increasingly difficult to sustain, mainly due to the external pressure from various superior bodies, which demanded that the Institute subordinate its scholarly work to politically derived definitions concerning the substance, the boundaries, and the role of sociology, as well as prescribing its relationship to the various tenets of historical materialism.

András Hegedüs had a clear vision of what sociology meant for him and he formulated it on various occasions. He was primarily and above all interested in a *critical investigation of social reality*. This, however, under the circumstances of the time, necessarily involved an open contestation of the politically sanctioned tenets of official ideology. For these reasons alone his sociology could hardly remain within the narrowly conceived professional

boundaries. As a matter of fact, many investigations of the latter type were, with relative ease, accepted and even coopted by the regime under the familiar slogan: "we do still have some deficiencies".

This does not mean, however, that the basic principles of his critical approach remained unchanged during his entire sociological career. Hegedüs himself distinguished between two basic periods in this respect. The first, lasting from the beginning of the sixties up to 1968, and the second period after sixty eight, following the collapse of hopes for the possibility of reforms, transforming the existing regime into "socialism with human face", when he too, like many others, took farewell from the reformist illusions of the past.

It is not an easy task to account for the merits and problems associated with the type of sociological enquiry pursued by Hegedüs and some of his colleagues; a sociology which, willy-nilly, crosses over into the arena of political debates. I have already mentioned some justification for this approach, but to avoid any misunderstanding I have to emphasise that many sociologists who did not followed this path had not been coopted by the regime either. There were among Hungarian sociologists of this period people whose work, though basically adhering to a seemingly non-political, professional framework and standards, could not be easily coopted, owing mainly to the selection of the issues investigated and/or the formulation of research questions, which often in their own right implied a social critique.

This type of critique, however, did not really suit Hegedüs' interest or personality. It did not suit him not because he was lacking sensitivity towards the critical potential of the very formulation of the vital social problems, but rather because his scholarly interests went well beyond the purely professional boundaries of sociology. He did not simply reject the existing system (speaking of the time when he already did), but passionately willed to face, to confront, and to understand its history, which - after all - was also his own life story.

Despite the biographical aspects of this explanation, I don't think that his approach and way of thinking is devoid of any relevance for the later development of Hungarian sociology or for the younger generations of Hungarian sociologists. Yet, I do understand that for the new generation this approach and oeuvre may appear "alien" or even inappropriate. Perhaps more time is needed to really understand this history. Also the conditions of reaching such an understanding are radically different today. While the need for social reflection and critique is as pertinent today as it was in the past, there emerged and already function - some more, some less successfully - public forums for the political and social debates independent of sociology. This undoubtedly constitutes a process of social "normalisation". Whether the impact of this development upon sociology itself is unambiguously positive is another question altogether and I have some serious doubts in this respect.

In any case, the significance and meaning of András Hegedüs' sociological heritage deserves to be rethought. I am convinced that there will come a time for the serious analysis and evaluation of his sociological work and that it will bring to light many valuable lessons and insights for the future.

It was the end of June 1999, when I have received András' last letter, together with his, just published, small book of reflections under the ominous title: "Admonition to Survivors". In his letter, he took a final farewell, though at that time I did not really comprehend it and considered it as an expression of his long-suffered depression, which, especially after the death of his wife, worsened dramatically.

In the book I found an aphorism which seems to reflect quite accurately András' own reflection upon his life and is thus perhaps appropriate to end this brief reminiscence with:

"I know I erred
but, striving for the good and the true
it is not fair to be weighed down
by failings of the past."