

Gyula Rézler

BEGINNING OF A CAREER IN SOCIOLOGY

I recall from a distance of 55 years my first meeting with Hegedüs, the first steps he took in the area of sociological research and my role therein. During a short but eventful period of my life did our path cross. Hegedüs did not forget either about our transitory relationship. When, shortly before his untimely death, he sent me a copy of his book, "The Spell of History and Power" he included this dedication: "To Rézler Gyula with thanks for the start you gave me".

I first met András Hegedüs during the summer of 1943. At that time, with the co-operation of László Szabó, I was in the process of setting up the Hungarian Institute of Labour Relations. In order to carry out our research plans, a need for competent research arose. Among others, the director of the Györfly College, an organisation of progressive students was contacted for recommending qualified graduate students in social sciences. András Hegedüs and Ferenc Szűcs were sent for an interview. Both László Szabó and myself were impressed by their competency and their interest in the problems of industrial workers. We decided that these features plus their analytical approach qualified them to assist us in our research activities.

We agreed that they will participate in the initial research project of the Institute that attempted to investigate and measure, on the basis of a sample, amounting to 40,000 industrial workers, the social and economic situation of the Hungarian industrial work force of 600,000 (retrospectively, I fully realise that, in view of the contemporary statistical methods, a much smaller sample would have been sufficient to obtain the same results).

The project in which Hegedüs and Szűcs were to be involved, was described in a publication of the Institute that contained its mission and programmes, in the following manner: "We cannot find a more urgent and important task than to unveil the real conditions of the industrial work force in Hungary. Therefore, in its first research project, the Institute will initiate a representative data collection based on a sample of 40,000 workers. The purpose of this project is to learn about the social, economic and cultural conditions on the industrial workers' population. Emphasis will be placed on the unit workers defined by their place of employment rather than the location of their housing. This approach was decided because one should not disregard the impact of the work environment on the workers which can only be observed within the confines of the plant and particularly in the workshop, within which they perform their job daily".

In the first phase of the above project, Hegedüs and his colleagues attended meetings where the methodology and procedures of the planned research were first discussed and later defined. On the basis of the criteria agreed upon, an interview guide was constructed. In the course of the discussion, I had ample opportunity to observe Hegedüs' mind in work and to recognise his analytical thought process and his approach to problem solving.

In the next phase of the research project, Hegedüs and Szűcs were charged to visit selected industrial sites in order to interview non-supervisory employees. Unfortunately, they could not conclude their job because the operation of the Institute was adversely affected by the

invasion of Hungary by the German army. The Institute's research activity slowed down gradually until it was limited to a trickle due to the fact that its officers and employees chose to get involved in the anti-nazi resistance movement in one way or another.

During the summer, Hegedüs was arrested for his illegal activities in the "Peace" Party by the political police in his Institute office. I succeeded in warning Szûcs in time who was also engaged in similar political action. Thus, he avoided the ordeal Hegedüs went through until his successful escape from a moving train.

Needless to say, the collection of data was suspended. The interview logs were stored in the cellar of the Institute. When the district wherein the Institute was located was occupied by the advancing Soviet troops, the billeted soldiers used the archives for heating purposes.

However, the project that involved Hegedüs until his capture, gave him the opportunity to familiarise himself with the experimental methodology of sociological research and, perhaps such experience contributed somewhat to his subsequent career in this discipline.

Hegedüs recalled his short tenure in the Institute in the following manner: "During the spring of 1943, I was invited to present a lecture on the industrial workers in the college. Approximately, at the same time, I started working for Gyula Rézler who intended to continue writing his book on the history of the Hungarian labour movement the first volume of which covered the period ending with World War I. My lecture was primarily motivated by Rézler's publication. I recall that, before my presentation, I took a walk in the hills of Buda and hiding myself behind the bushes, read loudly the text of my lecture several times. Notwithstanding, I still experienced a great deal of stage-fever" (The Spell of History and Power, 1993: 51-52).

Due to the arrest of Hegedüs, our relationship was permanently severed. When I later learnt about his lucky escape from a speedy train that would have taken him to Sopronkőhida, where political detainees were executed, through a mutual friend I offered him the payment of his salary. I am not sure if he had ever received my message as it was left unanswered.

Our paths diverged sharply in the coming years. He made a rapid ascendancy in the hierarchy of the Communist Party, culminating with his appointment as prime minister of Communist Hungary. On the other hand, I was forced by circumstances to illegally leave the country. However, I learnt later with a grudging respect about his brave opposition to the leaders of the ruling Communist Party in a way that resembled to the conversion of the St. Paul on the road to Damascus. His change of heart enabled him to restart his career in sociology. To my best knowledge, the fruits of his extensive research resulted in a number of acclaimed books and essays.

I believe that it is not my task to evaluate his contribution to the discipline of sociology. Only those contemporaries of Hegedüs who witnessed his work are in the position and qualified to evaluate his performance.