

Paul Ignotus

Paul Ignotus, writer, critic, historian, polemicist, died on the 31st of March, 1978, in London. His legacy is a twofold one. With his incisive lucidity and his charm he made a lasting personal impression on anyone who met him; at the same time, both his scholarly work and even his more ephemeral writings are a monument to his dedication to an ideal of a democratic Hungary. His life was fragmented, broken by historical events over which he had no control, but this appeared only to make him ever more determined to defend his ideas.

He was born in Budapest in 1901 into a literary family—his father having been one of the leading figures associated with the innovatory literary journal *Nyugat*—and he himself began to write in his university days, a habit which he continued for the rest of his life. In inter-war Hungary he acquired renown as a crusading journalist, notably with the paper *Esti Kurír*, and he contributed widely to literary publications as well. Paradoxically, what he fought for was something that barely existed in Hungary—a liberal democratic ethos—and the setbacks he suffered in that fight had direct consequences for him. In 1938 he felt constrained to leave Hungary for exile in London. He worked closely with Count Mihály Károlyi during the war. His aim, as before, was the establishment of a democratic political order.

After the war he was appointed press attaché to the Hungarian embassy in London, and it was from this post that he returned to Budapest for his father's funeral, only to be swept up in the Rajk purges. He was not released from prison until 1956, when he left Hungary for a second exile after the failure of the revolution. In the 1960's he revisited Hungary. While he acknowledged that much had changed since the early 1950's, he was fully aware that it was not a society in which he wanted to live. He was among the first to point to the haunting resemblance between the consolidation achieved in the 1960's and 1970's and that of the interwar period.

Back in London after 1956, he returned to the fray, to write. He edited the émigré paper *Irodalmi Újság* for a spell and produced numerous articles in both Hungarian and English. His book *Political Prisoner*, drawing on his own experiences, appeared in 1959, to be followed by *The Paradox of Maupassant* in 1966. His analysis of Hungarian history and society, entitled *Hungary*, was published in 1972. This book will continue to be required reading not only as an introduction to twentieth century Hungary but also as a vivid portrait

of Hungarian intellectual life in the interwar period. At the time of his death, he was writing a history of Budapest as seen through the prism of his family's history.

From the standpoint of Hungarian intellectual history, however, Ignóty's most lasting contribution was his role in bringing out the literary journal *Szép Szó* (1936-1938). He published this journal in collaboration with Atila József, one of the greatest poets in the Hungarian language, and François Fejő, who subsequently established himself as a historian and political scientist in France. *Szép Szó*, which might be translated as "persuasion," was the voice of the non-communist radical left, the urbanists, who, in the late 1930's, were equally at odds in Hungary with the communists and with the populists. It outspokenly defended the ideals of democracy, and it was pitiless in its hostility to nationalist mysticism. For the rest of his life Ignóty remained wedded to urbanism, even to the extent of overlooking the genuinely revitalizing impact of populism on Hungarian intellectual life. For him there could only be one kind of democracy, and he believed that appeals to the Hungarian "people," or the concept of *mélymagyarság* (being Hungarian to the marrow), concealed conscious or unconscious, overt or covert, anti-Semitism and demagoguery.

Ignóty's other great love was literature. His commitment to literature was shown, for one, by his readiness to secure a literary home for Attila József, who had broken with the populists and had been expelled by the communists; he provided the poet with the intellectual infrastructure that contributed substantially to Attila József's last great flowering. Ignóty never gave up his love for literature. He demanded high standards of content and style, even from his friends and ideological allies. I remember his comment on the output of the demythologizing school of Hungarian historians of the 1960's and 1970's, whose ideas he strongly supported: "Why can't these people write clearly, in a decent style?" he complained. Conversation was his *forte*. Perhaps he was most in his element as a *frondeur*. He attacked humbug, stupidity, obscurantism, mysticism, and oppression with relish. But he was never dogmatic; his commitment to reason and rationality was complete.

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