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# *The Private and the Political: Moments in the Endless Struggle for Freedom\**



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The first thing I would like to say is that it was a great honour for me when Kiss Tamás asked me this summer to give a talk today on my father, my life with him and beyond, and I would like to thank you all for being here.

It is a very strange, moving and redemptive activity to reconsider my father's life six years after his death, which came as an unexpectedly gentle end to five years of drastic physical decline following the last and largest in a series of heart-attacks and twenty years of depression. And it is an especially welcome opportunity to dwell on his heroism and the heroism he and Kiss Tamás and all the students of the University of Szeged inspired in their countrymen and countrywomen 60 years ago, and to be able to speculate aloud with you if heroism is still possible in our times, and if so, how we can embody it. For the way things are going, in Europe or America, it may well soon be necessary, as Hannah Arendt writes, to risk security for freedom, life for the world.

I would like to begin not with the chronology of my father's life, but with the chronology of how I knew him.

My father, Lejtényi András Gábor, a name he anglicised to Andrew Gordon Lejtenyi, was a fat, jovial, intense and temperamental man who loved food, beer, money, freedom and his family. He fought in a revolution, passed a few months in a refugee camp, got on a boat to Canada and started life in the West, as the saying goes, with nothing but the shirt on his back. Having arrived in Montreal as a refugee, he worked a variety of odd jobs before getting his license as a chartered accountant. After a few years, he met my mother, fell "ass over tea-kettle in love", to use his expression, and – well – here I am.

We were great friends, a couple of hams trying to out-charm each other, proud to be in the other's company. In the summers he took me swimming and was a joker in the public pool near our house. On our walks home, he would impart his life's wisdom to me, with

such pearls as, "Money is the only freedom; and gold is the only real money." The word freedom stuck; money, however, took on a poisonous flavour in our family history that made me wary of pinning many of my hopes to it.

Embittered by the outcome of the revolution in Hungary and the world's inaction and broken promises, in Canada my father became a stock-broker and a die-hard Reaganite, following the logic that if communism was the worst of all possible systems, free-market capitalism must ipso facto be the best. He was a man of passionate, extreme convictions, inwardly compelled to challenge all boundaries, including, finally, those of the stock-market. In the late 1980's, he once again risked everything: this time it was all of his money and all of his clients' money on a deal that pushed and even crossed the edge of legality. If it had worked, he would have made millions and lived on the crest of what he thought was freedom: beyond the Law, thanks to his wits, his courage and his sheer force of will. And the money.

It didn't work. At the critical moment, the authorities got wind of the deal and shut it down; he lost all his money and all his clients' money. He was left with nothing. We were lucky he didn't go to jail. This was a great reversal less financially for my family – for my mother was earning well with her medical practice – than emotionally and psychologically. Forgive the cliché but: he was never the same again.

At the time, he was in his early 50's and as the economy almost simultaneously took a dive into recession, he had no choice but to go into early retirement. In a sense, it was then that he began to retire from life. He was still my beloved Dad, who would occasionally pick me up from school when I was feeling ill, and we would watch movies after he made me a beautiful lunch, by which time I was feeling perfectly healthy again. But as the years passed the happy moments became fewer and fewer. He was by turns remote or too close, shaking

with rage and a bundle of intense emotions I could not fathom. My mother worked long hours to ensure our financial security, while I dreamed of escape.

At 19 I made my first journey to Europe, and when I came home, I moved out, with a vague but fixed goal in mind: I must live in Europe. I didn't know how I was going to manage it, so I concentrated on my studies. At university I majored in Religious Studies and continental European philosophy. Reading continental philosophy means reading the Germans, and to understand their philosophy you should also understand their literature, so it was then that I took my first German literature class – on the communist Bertolt Brecht.

My father may not have known it, but it was at that time that I defected. Religious Studies had in a sense been a way for me to think about the universe and our place in it while avoiding political issues altogether. This ended with Brecht, and my political – that is, leftist – education began. After writing my Master's thesis on the German-language Jewish poet Paul Celan, who was a Holocaust survivor, I decided to switch faculties and do my PhD in Germanistics. I had only been learning German for two years at that point, so full of confidence and high zest, I went to Berlin to take a one-month intensive language course that would prepare me for my readings of Hegel, Kant, Goethe, et al. Of course. One month.

There's a Jewish joke that goes, "If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans." After a few weeks I met the boy who was to become my German boy-friend, and it changed my life. Unable to endure a long-distance relationship, a year later I moved to Berlin, where I have had a lot of adventures, including Big Love and Big Sorrow.

After my German boy-friend and I parted ways, I was still determined to stay in Europe, and that meant, for the time being at least, Berlin. Which meant periodic visits to the Ausländerbehörde. It occurred to me about 3

years ago that life would be much simpler if I were a European citizen. But of what country? Did I really want to be German? The answer presented itself: Why be German if I could be Hungarian?

It was then that I started thinking about my father's stories again. I was perhaps about 8 years old the first time he told me about the revolution. One morning, he came into my room, his hair still damp from the shower and smelling of after-shave, and told me there had once been a revolution in Hungary, he had fought in it, and he had killed 88 communists, and his only regret was that he'd been found out and had had to flee before he could reach his goal of 100. But his mother had alerted him that the secret police knew his identity and were after him. So he left, almost on the spur of the moment, and, like hundreds of thousands of other Hungarians, he walked to Austria.

Sitting in a bedroom painted pink in a house in an idyllic Canadian suburb, I was, to put it mildly, somewhat overwhelmed by the tale. I processed the events he described as I would a cowboys and Indians movie and went on, somewhat disturbed, playing with my dolls. Over the years, I heard this story told with minor variations dozens of times. My father was a great raconteur and the revolution became in our Canadian life one among many adventures he loved to entertain a room with. On the other hand, when I asked him if I could go to Saturday school to learn Hungarian, he refused. Eventually, then, cut off from this most essential contact, his stories became equivalent to his silence. It was part of his obscure past, not our bright future. Hungary and the revolution, I think, looking back, belonged to the wound we should not touch.

In 2007 my father and Kiss Tamás were reunited, if only virtually, and while he was too ill to travel, my mother, my brother Kenneth and I came to Szeged to see the statue that had been erected in his and the other freedom fighters' honour and receive a medal in his

name. It was then that I learned about MEF-ESZ, that my father had not only participated in the revolution; with his demand for a free student union independent of Soviet control, he had put the wheels of revolution in motion. I was amazed and proud. I learned that it had all started with a proposal to strike compulsory Russian language courses from the curriculum, that this led to the proposal that the Soviets should be expelled from Hungary and finally with the demand for participatory democracy in lieu of totalitarian dictatorship.

This had all begun here, at this university. I am in awe of the courage Kiss Tamás and my father – and finally all the students – displayed in those days. It wasn't long before the movement went to Budapest and became national and international history.

I have tried again and again to imagine what it would be like, knowing that at any moment you could get arrested, detained and tortured for speaking out against power, not knowing who was with you, who against. 2007 was the first time I saw the pictures of my father – a handsome, thin young man – at the podium, transmitting through his words the seeds of freedom, making it appear possible for the first time in over a decade of oppression. This is what he said 60 years ago:

The aim of the union is to ensure that the young people leaving the universities and colleges, dedicated to represent the mind of the nation, should not be an indifferent, passive mass, a group of cowardly, pliable and mean people, but an army fighting bravely and soulfully for the nation, the country and for a happier future. These people should not fear speaking the truth, they should serve the nation and the country with their talents, knowledge and ability. The Stalin and Rákosi system brought up intellectual cripples and sycophants. They used merciless and inhuman means against anyone who dared raise their voice in the name of reason and humanity against their brutality and failures. They tried with some success

to teach us selfishness, unprincipledness, repression and how to prostrate ourselves. They wanted to crush the desire for freedom coming from our souls, they wanted to turn us into slaves accepting their perfidies obediently. The spirit of the 20th Congress swept these intentions away. A free, productive atmosphere is unfolding. The aim of our youth organization is to sweep these remains away from our consciousness to the perfection of our nation, country and ourselves.



These words made a space where a new reality was possible. It was a courageous act, an act of freedom, that made the revolution possible. And so, set ablaze with this hope, the students took the movement to the capital to challenge the structures of domination and be free human beings in the world. We know what happened then.

But in a sense, I don't. It is at this moment, after the move to Budapest, that my father's role in the revolution becomes obscure. What remains is the story he told me when I was a child, his rages, his silences. He was later in life obsessed by Stalinism, the gulag and all the other perfidies committed in the name of communism. As much as I learned from his outbursts, we did not talk in the sense having of an open dialogue about any of these things. Traumatized by the re-establishment of Soviet control and the betrayal of politicians at home and abroad, he turned his back on his home and his face to the future. It was almost as if his arrival in Canada had been a point nil and all his life and actions in Hungary were effectively banished to a distant past, devoid of validity for his present and our future.

My father threw in his lot with the capitalists and if Hungary was not economically viable, there was no point in talking about it. His expectations of his Canadian children were that we all become very successful, very rich captains of industry, overcoming any obstacle

that got in the way of our fortunes and defying every authority in our pursuit of personal freedom, the vehicle of which was money.

Under glasnost, my father returned to Hungary once to visit his aging mother, with whom he had an acrimonious relationship. He came back after one week, and again, it was something we did not talk about. He simply said how glad he was to live in Canada. Of course back then, materially speaking, Canada was – and is – the land of milk and honey. Yet I wonder.

My father's life seems marked by a tendency to go over the edge, to challenge fate and the given reality in a way reserved only for the gods. One of the albeit American myths he identified with was that of the self-made man, the individualist able to conquer the world by willing it so. I don't believe he stopped loving Hungary, but he thought he could and should live without it. This was, in my opinion, an understandable mistake, one born of great pain and the conviction that his will was stronger than any sorrow.

Although historically not comparable, I know what it is like to live in a faraway country, to be always a stranger and a little bit strange. Unlike me, my father had no possibility of going back home. Part of his courage was to risk "making it" absolutely on his own. For a long time he did, for a long time he was successful. My suspicion is that success was the compensation for his loneliness.

It is therefore no coincidence that his best-friends in Montreal were Hungarians. Yet a few friends do not constitute a homeland. If I consider my own emotional reaction to being here, to being "back" in Hungary, it is like a piece of a puzzle that had unbeknownst to me long been ajar finally falling into place. I can only assume then that he was immensely homesick without knowing it. This unknown, unspoken homesickness may even be worse than the ones we acknowledge.

Of course, there is a good chance that unless heavily sedated, he would hate me saying all this, and I can imagine him now in Heaven with a lightning bolt in his hand preparing to strike me down if I say one more mushy word about homesickness or sorrow.

So ok ok, I'll stop. What I would like to do now is impart a final honour. If you will, allow me to return to my training in Religious Studies. As you may know, the Gospel of Mark has a very ambiguous ending. Jesus is resurrected but the Apostles fail to grasp the significance, they do not take up the task their Messiah has presented them. A theological interpretation of this ending is that the failure of the apostles requires the reader to act in their place. He or she must assume the evangelical responsibility of carrying on the holy word into the world.

I am of course not making any direct comparisons. But the inability of the interim government to complete the mission begun by the spirit of freedom that had appeared in '56 is not a cause for defeat or despair on our part. Rather, it is a call for us to carry on what those courageous students began and try to complete their vision. For every act in the cause of freedom is a free act, and every free act in the world is a manifestation – however brief – of the spirit of freedom itself.

I was taught to challenge every authority, and so I do, including his. As you can see, I did not become a millionaire designing software. I have returned to Hungary, despite all its political and economic turmoil, with gladness in my heart. At times, I am overwhelmed by the strong sensation of homecoming that I feel when I am here. I am still learning about the relevance of the revolution, what it means for this nation, for its history and its present. It is my belief that honouring the revolution also honours the spirit of courage, integrity and freedom that dwells in all of us. \*