

MY FRIEND GYURI

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Gyuri was probably the first intellectual I met; certainly the first I called a friend. I had left a newsroom in New Jersey and come to Poland for the love of a woman. At the English Language College in Warsaw, where I found a job teaching, the faculty consisted mostly of women, one of whom was Gyuri's wife.

It was at a party, perhaps for his birthday, that I met Gyuri. I remember a small apartment crowded with people, Gyuri towering over most of them. His tall, thin frame and his fair, narrow beard didn't conform to my image of a Hungarian, which had been planted primarily by the comedian Ernie Kovacs during his appearances on American TV. Gyuri and I quickly discovered that we both had Polish wives and were now in the novel position of teaching our native tongues to their compatriots. Though unlike me, Gyuri had experience in the classroom, with *my* native tongue. In fact, he knew much more about the greatest writers in English than I did.

Not that he showed off his knowledge. And it wasn't confined to Shakespeare or to the Middle Ages. As I left the party, he was talking enthusiastically to a young American student about Béla Bartók.

We didn't see a lot of each other; we were both busy with teaching, writing, and learning Polish. It was the early '80s, the period of Solidarity, and we desperately wanted to read the newspapers and understand the discussions. Gyuri was an intellectual but not of the ivory tower contingent; he took an avid interest in politics, especially, understandably, those of the Cold War. And in this as in other realms, he remained clear-eyed. The supposed unity and brotherhood among Eastern European peoples just because they shared a common enemy was, he once suggested, a bit artificial.

When spring finally arrived, we sometimes played tennis, usually on the red clay courts on Solec Street. He looked even taller and thinner in shorts, which, in the fashion of the day, were short and tight. I enjoyed our conversations as much as our rallies. Once I met him at his apartment and as we headed to the door, he dashed to the typewriter to set down a sentence that had just come to him. Those were still the days of typewriters – and wooden racquets.

Gyuri came to my birthday party in June of 1982. I was turning 30 and Poland was entering its sixth month of martial law. At one point I heard him speaking to a guest

about Hungarian wine – Egri Bikavér was a staple at Polish parties back then – and realized with a pang that his Polish was better than mine.

After we returned to our respective countries, our friendship continued through letters (it was also the time of letters) and occasional visits. Gyuri spent a weekend with us in Philadelphia, where he read sections of the book I was writing about Poland and kindly offered his thoughts. He had just finished a stint as a visiting lecturer at Elon College in North Carolina, an experience he spoke of with great fondness, and I imagined him enjoying there a kind of Pnin-like idyll, minus the fumbblings and the pathos.

One year after the Berlin Wall came down, I made it to his beloved city of Szeged. I had become the travel editor of a newspaper in Florida and wanted to see, and write about, the new Eastern Europe. Gyuri showed me the sights while also taking me to political meetings. Predictably, he was even more engaged than he'd been in Poland, and I was thrilled to see him participating in his own country's transformation.

Gyuri visited us in Fort Lauderdale, where he went for a swim in our condo pool on a day when most Floridians were dressed in sweaters. (Cool weather occasionally descends on South Florida, usually on the weekends when we have guests.) During our conversations I was impressed, and a bit surprised, by his familiarity with new technologies; his interest in photography had expanded to include video, and he appeared quite at ease in the world of computers. It seemed odd that someone whose scholarly pursuits were rooted in the past should be so attuned to the advances of the present day, but as I thought about it I saw the common thread, which was a boundless curiosity and thirst for knowledge. The Medievalist was a true Renaissance man.

Our conversations always included our latest literary and musical enthusiasms, so I learned about Sebestyén Marta before the film *The English Patient* came out. (Later I would hear her at an outdoor concert in Szeged.)

After he got involved with Hungarian studies at his university, Gyuri began taking students to Transylvania – and proposing the trip to me. Like most travel writers, I usually traveled alone, but this was a unique opportunity to see a place with someone who was intimately familiar with its history and culture. (Actually, with two people, since Ildiko was an ethnographer.) I'd been intrigued by Transylvania ever since reading Patrick Leigh Fermor's *Between the Woods and the Water*, the second volume of his epic walk in the 1930s from Holland to Istanbul. Also appealing was the prospect of writing a travel story on Transylvania that wouldn't be about Dracula, a revolutionary concept in the U.S.

I arrived in Szeged in the summer of '96 with a copy of *Between the Woods and the Water* to add to Gyuri's library. The night before our departure, we visited Gyuri's mother in her elegant apartment, where his sister served us tea and photos of Transylvania. As

mother and son kissed goodbye, the former's eyes were wet with tears. Filled with my own anxiety about the trip, I wasn't surprised. Out on the street Gyuri said, "It makes me feel guilty when my mother says she wishes she were coming with us." It was my first living indication of the Hungarian attachment to Transylvania.

Our departure the next day was filmed by Gyuri. Somewhat reluctantly, I thought of Jim Jarmusch and *Stranger Than Paradise*.

Our first stop, in the town of Deva, showed me an advantage of traveling with companions that went beyond learning. The hotel we found was bleak; our room had three beds but no bathroom. Ildiko insisted Gyuri accompany her to the facility down the hall. Returning he announced, like a maître d'hôtel presenting the night's seating arrangements: "One is marked *WC Persona* and the other is marked *WC Clienti*." Then he added, "The shower is an absolute horror."

As we laughed – Gyuri also noted wryly that none of the beds came with a reading lamp – the thought occurred to me that had I been alone I would have been tense, depressed, vaguely suicidal. But sharing this miserable experience with friends – friends with a sense of humor – made the night not only bearable but in its own way enjoyable. As we climbed into our individual beds, Gyuri recalled the final scene in Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey*. And here was one more blessing of traveling with others: sometimes they unknowingly give you the title for your story.

Over the next week, as we took in the castle of Vajdahunyad, the cathedral in Gyulafehérvár (with the tomb of Hunyadi János), a cozy farmhouse lodging in Gyergyószárhegy, the sublime Cock Church in Kolozsvár, I saw how Gyuri's knowledge of the region was supported by a proud and unabashed patriotism. He was not a dispassionate scholar but someone with a deep love for a lost patrimony.

The trip ended, at least in my story, at a confirmation party in a muddy village outside Kolozsvár. Long wooden tables stretched between hay bales in a barn, and room was made for us at one in the back. Gyuri immediately fell into conversation with the man seated next to him. "How many American academics", I wrote later, "would be so comfortable in such earthy surroundings? Part of it, of course, was the working of a cultural solidarity, but much of it was his winning, unpretentious nature. I could not have found a better guide, or friend."

After the party, as we made our way back to Hungary, Gyuri's Lada broke down. Just like that, the engine died. Some young men emerged from a nearby tavern and immediately got to work under the hood. (Gyuri's interests, like mine, didn't include the automotive.) Soon, dozens of car parts littered the ground. The situation looked hopeless, but after what felt like hours the parts were fitted back into place and the engine miracu-

lously roared to life. It had been our longest interaction with Romanians, one that literally saved our trip, but because it didn't fit with the theme – of Hungarian Transylvania – I didn't include it in my story. The story was already too long as it was. When it appeared in the newspaper a few months later, it ran in two parts, on consecutive Sundays. Gyuri, after reading them both, told me he preferred the first part, as the second seemed a bit sentimental. It didn't matter that some of the sentiment was directed at him.

Our most recent meeting, like our first, was on neutral ground. Gyuri was a visiting professor at the University of Kansas, a state I had never been to, and invited me out to do a reading from my new book, a collection of travel stories that included "A Sentimental Journey." He reserved a venue on campus and assembled a good crowd of friends and faculty. I read about our trip to Transylvania, stumbling miserably over the placenames, and then answered a few questions. When I was finished, Gyuri got up and regaled everyone with a colorful account of our car's breakdown and the Romanian Samaritans who had come to our rescue. And, a bit belatedly for me, the audience came to life. (Since that evening I have made a point at book events to always spend at least as much time talking as I do reading.)

I sat in on one of Gyuri's classes, impressed by his manner – a kind of demanding casualness – with American college students. And I met his daughter Anna, who had inherited not only her father's stature but also his intellect; at breakfast one morning the two of them engaged in a lively discussion on the merits and shortcomings (Gyuri's stance) of Buddhism as a working life philosophy. Such was my introduction to the great state of Kansas.

Postscript: In 2017 my wife and I traveled to Portugal and one night in Lisbon went to a fado club. At the break, we began talking to the couple next to us, who we learned were from Connecticut. On hearing that my wife was Polish, the woman mentioned that she had spent a year in Hungary.

"Where?" I asked.

"A city called Szeged", she said.

"I've been there", I said. "I have a good friend who teaches at the university."

She mentioned that she had been in a Hungarian studies program.

"Maybe you know him", I said. "His name is György Szőnyi."

"Gyuri!" she said. "He was the program director!"

We talked like fast friends until the next set, two Americans in Portugal sharing stories of the Hungarian who had indelibly touched their lives.