

TIBOR MERAY

Imre Nagy, Communist

On the occasion of the first anniversary of the execution of Imre Nagy, we publish this tribute to his memory by an old friend and fellow-Communist, Tibor Meray - a Hungarian writer and political journalist now living in exile in Paris.

'Did you know Imre Nagy personally?' - 'Yes, I did.' - 'What kind of a man was he?'

How should I answer this question? Should I say that Nagy was an outstanding personality, a man full of humanity, an honest man? Should I say that he was an utterly different kind of man from Rakosi and Gero? In that case I ought first to explain what kind of men Rakosi and Gero were. Should I say that he was short and stocky, with a thick moustache, and that he wore old-fashioned pince-nez? If I were to describe him, it would be true to say that he looked much more like a provincial judge of the '90s than a Communist politician. But this might lead a Westerner to draw the conclusion that he was not a real Communist at all, and I know that Nagy - even from the depth of the grave - would protest against such an allegation.

Nagy's enemies have a much easier reply, calling him, without the slightest reservation, 'traitor', 'the pathmaker for reaction', or 'ally of the imperialists'. His friends who joined him *post mortem* are usually satisfied to give him a pat on the shoulder, and to say indulgently: "Yes, he meant well, but he was too weak and too easily influenced."

What can those of us say who not only liked but honoured him, and who wish to keep faith with his memory?

The first thing to say is this: he was a real *human being*. Perhaps this statement, taken on its own, does not make much sense; but if one places it in the context of the society within which he lived, it finds a new meaning. Marx analysed capitalist society and showed its growing de-humanisation, the ever-increasing inroads of utilitarianism. But the system which claims to be based on Marxism-Leninism, if it has little reason to boast of its successes in raising the standard of living, has surpassed, in de-humanisation and utilitarianism, its decaying antagonist. In Hungary, for a decade, Stalin's words - 'Our greatest wealth is man' - were written on the walls of enterprises and workshops. At the same time, if we except the period of Fascist domination, there has never before been a time in the history of the country when human preferences and aspirations, human dignity and individuality, have been so

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disregarded as in our decade. A bitter joke went the rounds in Budapest, that in the Party Hospital in Kutvolgy Street, where leading Party members were treated, Stalin's words were inscribed on the walls in the following adaptation : 'Our greatest wealth is these few men'.

The crucial difference between Imre Nagy and 'these few men' (and the system they upheld) concerned the question of Humanism. It can be best expressed in this way: Does Socialism exist for Man, or Man for Socialism? In October 1954, when the tension between Nagy and the Rakosi clique reached its climax, he said at a meeting of the Central Committee: 'The former economic policy did not take into account man, nor society, and reduced the idea of Socialism to the maximum production of iron and steel, that is, to over-industrialisation. That does not mean Socialism, comrades!' Two months later he was summoned to Moscow, and at the meeting of the Presidium there lay, in front of Malenkov, his speech, with this sentence strongly underlined. 'This is a calumny on the Party,' the Soviet leader shouted at him: 'It may be that we have committed some errors, but we never forget Man.'

Despite all this, Imre Nagy could not be compelled to give up his convictions. The verdicts against Laszlo Rajk, Andras Szalai, General Palfy - hundreds of executed and imprisoned Communists, internment-camps filled to the brim (he ordered their dissolution) - the exhaustion of the workers - hundreds of thousands of peasants forced to join *kolkhozes* - all this was more than enough for Imre Nagy to be aware of what it meant when the system claimed that 'man was well taken care of'. His humanism came partly from his political convictions; even more, it seemed to spring from his very nature. The other Communist leaders considered it as a matter for shame that they were born as human beings, having to walk on two feet, breathe air, eat and digest food. They wished to appear as superhuman creatures, with no faults and no private lives, working through the night in the service of the Party, regarding it as a 'petty-bourgeois hangover' if someone failed to attend a Party meeting on Sunday afternoon because he was visiting an aunt.

Imre Nagy loved to sit in his garden and drink with his friends, he loved to help his grandchildren when they learned to sleigh on the slopes of Hill Rozsa, he liked to stroll in the streets, he liked to turn round and look at a pretty girl, he liked to eat ice-cream in a pastry-shop, liked to dance *csardas* and sing old Hungarian folk songs.

He was not only a human being, but also an Hungarian. This tact was considered as another of his 'sins'. In one of his speeches,

delivered at the Congress of the Patriotic Popular Front, he used these words: 'the hearts of nine-and-a-half million Hungarians beat in unison'. He was rebuked for this at the Kremlin, and was accused of nationalism and chauvinism, because in nine-and-a-half million Hungarians there are to be found workers and former capitalists, peasants and kulaks - how could all these be mentioned at the same time and on the same level? Those who were not very consistent in other matters, and who produced without the least inhibition electoral results of 98.6% and 99.4% told him that this declaration of his meant the liquidation of the class struggle.

Rakosi, Gero, Farkas could not be accused of nationalism. If Moscow, in 1945, had sent them by accident, not to Budapest, but to Prague or Ulan Bator, they would have stood their ground at these places just as well. One could often hear Rakosi saying: 'The Italian Party? I founded it,' or: 'I told our Polish comrades that they are wrong in their religious policy; half of the Bishops must be put into prison, the other half must be bribed to co-operate, and then everything will be O.K.' I myself heard Gero declare that the greatest classics of Hungarian literature 'are out-dated and the people don't want them any more.'

Imre Nagy did not give birth to foreign Parties nor did he sweep Hungarian writers off Parnassus, and it may even be said that in his patriotism, as in his whole personality, there was something of the provincial. Notwithstanding this, in 1917 he fought as an internationalist volunteer in the ranks of the Red Army; for two decades he lived in exile in Moscow; and there is no doubt that he supported sincerely friendship, on equal terms, between the Soviet and Hungarian peoples. But the Great Hungarian Plain did not mean to him only the field for agrarian production, the towns of Miskolc and Csepel were, in his eyes, not just 'industrial centres', the rivers were not just means for irrigation planning and the grass not just the promoter of cattle-breeding. All this taken together, represented in his eyes the soil of his Fatherland. He did not think of this Fatherland of his as one of the Soviet republics, but as an independent, socialist state in close connection with the Soviet Union.

He was a quiet man, somewhat slow in his gestures and movements. He seemed to have inherited the great calm of his peasant ancestors. He rarely lost his temper; only when he witnessed obvious injustice or breaches of faith did he lose his control. (There was such an occasion on November 1st, 1956: Mikoyan and Suslov had left Budapest the day before, and had pledged their word that not one more Soviet soldier would enter Hungarian

territory. Only a few hours later Soviet tanks and armed forces poured across the border. Imre Nagy flew into a furious temper at this hypocrisy, and it was this - as much as political factors - which induced him to declare that Hungary wished to be neutral and to get out of the Warsaw Pact.)

Although a basic gentleness of character gave him a natural friendliness of manner, there was a certain stubbornness in him. Perhaps this derived from his childhood years', he was brought up as a Protestant in the county of Somogy, where the great majority are Catholic. This minority status engendered in him the spirit of rebellion. Hungarian Protestants are rightly called 'Calvinists with bull-necks'. They are, in fact, the most stubborn part of the nation. Imre Nagy liked peace and calm, and was willing to make compromises to ensure a calm and peaceful atmosphere. But when once convinced that he was in the right, nobody, not even God Himself, could have brought him round. In 1955, when he was Prime Minister for the first time, Suslov came to Budapest and sat for hours at his bedside to induce him to make a self-criticism and accept a Malenkov-type solution. Nagy would not listen either to promises or to threats; he preferred to be dismissed from his position rather than to make a humiliating 'mea culpa'.

He was a man and not a demi-god. He had his faults. He was somewhat vain, but all who work in politics have this kind of vanity. This showed itself especially at the time of his first Presidency, when he believed that he enjoyed the full confidence of the Kremlin. He was a poor judge of people, and often placed reliance in men who betrayed him at the first occasion and who - later - welcomed his death-verdict. But these faults did more harm to himself than to others. His character was utterly devoid of suspicion, sadism, the lust for power - characteristics of a great many Communists and other politicians. Perhaps this was due to the fact that he was never a 'politician', in the accepted sense, and considered himself more of a social scientist. Once, at the time of his exclusion, when I called on him at his private home, we chatted for hours, and during this time he never complained of his dismissal from his post as Prime Minister nor of his removal from the Political Committee, but he bitterly resented the fact that Rakosi, by means of a Party decision, had forced him to resign his membership of the Academy of Science. 'This is unjust' (he said), 'My membership of the Academy of Science was not a Party appointment, as in the case of my other positions; it was the reward for my many years of work in the field of agricultural science.'

Kossuth - the leader of Hungary's fight for national independence in 1848 - was Imre Nagy's political ideal. While Rakosi wished to become the Hungarian Stalin, Gero the Hungarian Kaganovitch, Revai the Hungarian Zhdanov - Imre Nagy longed to be the Communist Kossuth. He often referred to him in his speeches and revived Kossuth's ideas concerning a Danubian confederation in one of his most important theoretical essays, written in the years of his disgrace. In 1949, at the centenary of the Declaration of Independence, he spoke as Chairman of Parliament at the great Protestant Church in Debreczen, the Hungarian town called the 'Calvinist Rome'. In this speech he quoted the words of Kossuth and this, after all that has since occurred, sounds prophetic: 'The Lord can dispose of me however He wishes, He can send upon me suffering and anguish, scaffold or exile. There is one thing He can not inflict on me: that I should be the servant of the House of Austria.'

It is true that he did not equal Kossuth, either in his personality or in his conceptions; Kossuth was a fascinating figure, charming everybody who approached him. This can not be said of Imre Nagy. Kossuth was unequalled as orator, he spoke with fiery passion, used unexpected symbols and vivid figures of speech. He not only carried away his Hungarian listeners but he also had - as a foreigner - unique success abroad, in Great Britain and the United States. Imre Nagy spoke in an impressive voice with a fine musical intonation, like village priests in their Sunday sermons, but his sentences were rather colourless; an empty flood of compulsory Marxist-Leninist phraseology over-weighted his scripts. Finally, to conclude the parallel: Kossuth was, for nearly one year and a half at the head of a fight for freedom, he led his people through victories and lost battles, in sunshine and tempest to the final surrender, while Imre Nagy had but 13 days at his disposal.

But death granted him all that life had withheld from him. Kossuth had to eat for decades the sour bread of exile; Imre Nagy was executed: his murderers made a martyr of him, and raised him in the eyes of the nation, to the greatness of a Kossuthian figure.

The details of the fight he fought with his jailors from the moment when he was dragged out of the Yugoslav Embassy to the time of his execution, are not yet known. If they ever become known, I think we will open one of the most tragic chapters of our time. The little that we do know proves this. The Budapest authorities issued, two months after the execution, a White Book that brings, embedded in a mass of lies, some small quotations from

Imre Nagy's declarations before the Tribunal. These few samples prove, without a single exception, that Imre Nagy fought to the bitter end for his truth and his honour. He flatly denied all the accusations against him. Once he hurled his answer into the Chairman's face: 'I am sorry but I have to say that there are facts at stake, and it is I who know the facts.' With erect head, however, he took upon himself the responsibility for everything he had said or done.

A single brief quotation will be enough to throw some light on this nerve-racking fight. He was accused of not having enforced martial law against insurgents, and of not having any of the young freedom-fighters, who had been arrested, executed. Imre Nagy willingly acknowledged this 'accusation'. Here is the quotation:

Prosecutor: You agree that you did not order martial law?

Imre Nagy: I did not say this. My declarations on the radio are available, in which I make reference to martial law and its enforcement.

Prosecutor: Did you do all that was in your power to have martial law enforced?

Imre Nagy: This did not come within my sphere of responsibility. I did what was my duty. I supposed that martial law touched only common law offenders.

Prosecutor: You did not wish to use martial law against those who owned arms illegally and fought with these arms against the Hungarian People's Republic?

Imre Nagy: No - I did not want to use martial law against them ...

'I did what was my duty.' Is there a simpler, tougher creed, a more all-embracing acceptance of responsibility to be found? The publication, designed to accuse him, acknowledges finally that Imre Nagy denied his guilt to the end. Is it not genuine proof of greatness of soul, of unwavering courage, to deny guilt when the old and sick body lives in prison, when wife, daughter and two grand-children are held as hostages, when confession could mean the only ray of hope for liberation and life?

His enemies call him a traitor, his *post mortem* friends are graciously willing to forgive him his weakness and his susceptibility to influence, well-meaning people, who did not know him, ask the question: What kind of man was he?

That is the kind of man he was.