

## Budapest 1900

*J.Lukacs*

July 3-9, 2020

This book is meant as a snapshot of a city, thus it is not a history or, if you prefer, a biography of a city, although some snatches of general Magyar history is necessary, as well as an epilogue bringing us up to the 80's. The author is Hungarian born in Budapest 1924. He fled his Native country soon after the end of the Second World War as it was turning Communist, and settled in Pennsylvania, where he became a professor of history at a Womens College. Of Jewish origin he was born into a family converted to Roman Catholicism, a faith to which he was to be committed. He used to describe himself as a reactionary.

The period he chooses for the city is the turn of the century (as opposed to the turn of the Millennium), more specifically 1900. There are several reasons for that, one being that in a sense this coincides with the zenith of the city. Although Hungary is an old Nation, in 1896 it celebrated its Millennium as a Nation, (thus about as old as Poland), but for most of its history it was a marginal country, orphaned, as the author writes, by the singularity of its language. In the 17th century it was conquered by the Turks and liberated by the Austrians in the succeeding one. It became part of the multi-cultural Habsburgian empire and after a National revival in the early 19th century culminating in the year of revolution 1848 there came about the so called *Ausgleich* of 1867, i.e. a historical compromise, it became the junior partner of the Austrian empire, which henceforth was to be known as the Austro-Hungarian empire, or the K.u.K (Kaiserlich und Königlich), as a result of a wise and farseeing decision by the emperor Franz Joseph II, who clearly must count as one of the most admirable emperors of European history. The Hungarians were allowed a large degree of Home rule, with its own Parliament (the concrete manifestation of which would be erected anew in unprecedented splendor arund 1900), but of course still very much a junior partner, and although its own nationalistic ambitions were given its due, its own minorities, of which there were many, were certainly not given theirs. Hungary was at that time a rather extended country containing within its realm great swathes of which is now Romania and Croatia but still relatively sparsely populated as a result of the Turkish tyranny.

Now Budapest would similarly play the rôle of a junior Vienna. In fact its origins were Germanic rather than Magyar and did consist of two parts, a hilly Buda on the right side of the Danube, i.e. of the east, and a flat part - Pest - in the west. Buda remained dominated by the German speaking well into the 19th century<sup>1</sup>. The author makes a point that the river bisects the city and hence, unlike the case with Vienna, is an integral part of it. But

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<sup>1</sup> All through the Austrian realm there were German speaking colonists, as explained and described by Claudio Magris in his book on 'Donau'. Thus there was a significant minority of German speakers in modern Romania, many of whom was exchanged for hard cash by Ceaucescu in his dealings with the German Federal Republic.

in many ways it was more Viennese than Vienna. It was more beautiful and more rapidly growing, in fact at the time of 1900 it was the fastest growing city in Europe. And indeed the book starts, after a prelude describing the spectacle of the funeral of the celebrated painter Munkácsy<sup>2</sup>, with a description of the lay-out of the city and all its attractions. Palaces, parks, bridges, clubs, operas, theaters, and above all coffee-houses where it did out-coffee Vienna and Paris. Now coffee-houses were cheap and hence crowded. Even the down-and-out could afford to the price of a cup of coffee to idle away hours leisurely reading newspapers attached to bamboo sticks. Thus those establishments became social gathering places, especially for coterie of artists, writers, critics, journalists, in short the glitzy intelligentsia. Writers especially, could make the coffee-house into their workplaces, where the staff readily supplied for free reams of paper to be written on. And of course not only coffee was available, meals could be had, often at any time of the day (and night). Thus we are considering a vibrant cultural life taking place in the heart of the city among fellow citizens. So in fact the book turns out to be a study in nostalgia.

Given the setting, the next step is to describe the people who lived there and their concerns, of which politics played a major rôle, because Hungarian politics was reduced to a highly entertaining spectacle, and entirely myopic and uninhibitedly irresponsible. It provided for a rich theatrical suspense not unlike an interminable soap, where the speeches and attacks played out to a delighted and excited audience. Of course this would not have been possible without a rich variety of newspapers, each championing its own political agenda. The drawback of this was of course a tendency towards vulgarism and populism, where the substance of politics had to take second seat to its rhetorical excesses. But of course the political game in Hungary did not really have any serious consequences and could afford to be irresponsible as it was more or less contained within the more responsible Austrian stewardship.

Politically the Liberals, in the sense of 1848, with its emphasis on freedom, especially commercial, started to look less and less attractive; instead Nationalism, a more potent brew, became more and more pronounced. Also at this time anti-Semitism started to rear its head politically. Traditionally Magyars had welcomed Jews, their country was as noted sparsely populated and Jews were appreciated by their willingness to assimilate and in fact to become full-fledged Magyars themselves, more than willing to convert (as the author's own family illustrates). Financial, business and cultural life in Budapest tended to be dominated by Jews disproportionately which may have provoked a certain envy, not to say resentment, among the non-Jews, as national sentiments once more were coming to the fore. Maybe the first politician to successfully exploit anti-Semitism was Karl Lueger running for mayor in Vienna. He turned out to be a very successful and appreciated mayor, who never made good on his promises to attack the Jews. He thus was, as many politicians are, a hypocrite, which is not necessarily a bad thing. Stefan Zweig writes approvingly of him in his memoirs 'Die Welt von gestern' stressing that he was a very decent man after all. But he served as an inspiration for Hitler.

A large part of the focus of the book concerns the literary and artistic life of Budapest.

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<sup>2</sup> At his time very highly regarded, but now seen as a kind of publicity stunt. An artist catering spectacularly to a large public, but now, at least according to the author, seen as an embarrassment. It is telling that among the illustrations of paintings none by Munkácsy is included.

The author distinguishes a specific generation of writers and painters that came of age around 1900, being born in the 1870's. He lauds them for being revolutionaries, thus of doing away with old traditions effecting a break and instead bringing in new fresh ideas, contributing to the glory of the city at the time. This enthusiasm for what is new may be strange to come from someone priding himself of being a reactionary, on the other hand reactionaries must believe in something not just extolling the virtues of the past, or rather deploring what is new. And after all, old revolutions are as good as anything to hamper back to. Painting can be appreciated across linguistic barriers, as can of course music, but not literature, especially not poetry, at least not in any literal sense. The author presents a list of Hungarian writers, mostly unknown outside Hungary, who would deserve wider recognition, but would it be possible? Literature thrives on the specific, be it linguistic subtleties or chains of association which make sense for people of a certain time and space, but do not translate well. It is hard to convey the virtues and qualities of their works and what remains in the mind of the reader is merely a stream of meaningless names that refuse to stick in memory. And even the cavalcade of artists remains but a cavalcade, although samples of their paintings can at least be transmitted on the page, be it in small formats and devoid of color. What the author only touches on is the remarkable emergence of mathematicians and scientists starting around 1900 and continuing for a few decades. Unlike literary and artistic merit, such travel much better, and the twentieth century has seen many distinguished scientists, whose Hungarian origin has only been incidental. An example, but far from the only one, is von Neumann, referred to on the back cover, but in the book only in a list of names. Admittedly von Neumann was born in 1903 thus outside the scope of the book as are Teller (1908), Szilard (1898), Wigner (1902), but they were certainly products of the Budapest culture in a wider sense. The author refers to the excellent educational system that had been established in Hungary. A system based on the Prussian, which also inspired the Russian, and no doubt also influenced by the Austrian. Two features of the Prussian system were prominent. The quality of the education, intimately related to the demands put on the students and its egalitarian approach, meaning that it was in principle open to all deserving pupils. In spite of this egalitarianism it was an elite system fostering a meritocracy, something which nowadays have fallen into disregard, but to a reactionary such as the author, as well as to the author of this review, must be very congenial. Lukacs does, however, point to the reverse side, namely the pressures put on those who had to struggle to hang on, and ensuing suicides and carriers crashed and crumbled prior to take-off. In Zweig's memoirs one becomes privy to the precocious talents, in his case exclusively literary, that were displayed as early as in adolescence, and Lukacs give examples of distinguished literary and scientifically trained men who served as teachers, contributing greatly to the intellectual atmosphere. At that time being a teacher of a Gymnasium carried with it prestige as there was also a living connection between universities and the upper echelons of the school system. What the author does not dwell upon is that in Hungary mathematics also carried prestige, not just literary talent, and at that time there flourished math clubs and competitions, the forerunners to the International Mathematical Olympiads. The difference to now was that, as noted, mathematics was prestigious, and not just the concern of 'nerds'. Lukacs mentions Frigyes Riesz, maybe only a name to be dutifully dropped in his case, but there

was also a younger brother Marcel who came to play a crucial rôle in Swedish mathematics. And many more examples can be added. Admittedly this is peripheral to the main theme of the book, but mathematicians also took part of the coffee-house culture, which seems so Central European in the best sense. The Polish mathematician Stefan Banach active in nowadays Lviv, another Austrian-Hungarian city, ceded to Poland in the inter-war years, carried on his work as well as discussions with and examination of students in such settings (and Marcel Riesz carried the tradition to distant Lund).

But this charmed age had to come to an end, maybe far too soon. The First World War proved to be a catastrophe. It meant the total disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Austria itself became a mere German speaking rump in vain seeking inclusion in the greater Germany<sup>3</sup> and Hungary lost two thirds of its territory, and as a result there are major Hungarian minorities in Slovakia and Romania. Yet, in spite of the losses being catastrophic, they were not serious. Budapest, now an over-sized city in a greatly diminished country, just as was the case of Vienna, was able to, just as Vienna, experience a silver version of the golden days, the Second World War, was to prove much more disruptive. Although for the first five years Hungary could stay out of the war, its Jewish population relatively safe and intact, but then along with the German collapse on the eastern front Hungary was forced to take an active part. And dragging their feet they were invaded by the Germans welcomed with the Magyar version of the Nazi storm-troopers - emblazoned with the arrow cross. German bombardment heavily damaged the beautiful city which until then had been preserved almost intact (as Prague was to be), then came allied bombings to be capped off by a Soviet invasion, which left the city in rubbles. Budapest may have been worse off than both Warsaw and Berlin, and post-war reconstruction was not as rapid as in the other two cities, additionally the Russian invasion quenching the revolt of 1956 did not help much. Now thirty years later Lukacs is writing about his Native city, remarking that it has regained some of its lost beauty, but it now has become a magnet to tourists, both Hungarian expatriates and Western ones on a cultural pilgrimage. In fact far more tourists than used to grace it in the good old Golden days. Hungary at that time stood out economically from the Soviet bloc, and as the only city on the other side of the iron curtain it had traffic jams, something that a reactionary such as Lukacs can only have looked upon with mixed feelings.

Personally I visited Budapest twice (or four times depending on how to count) as stops on my way to and from Romania (Bucharest). The first time was in 1983 when I actually stayed over night in a private home and explored the city on tram, bus and foot. This was still in the days of the iron curtain, and the phenomenon of Hungary was somewhat piquant<sup>4</sup>. In those days the three contingent countries of Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary played somewhat heroic rôles as having stood up to Soviet dominance. Hungary in the fifties, Czechoslovakia in the sixties and Poland in the early eighties. My other stops in 2001 were just stops while changing trains, and then of course the wall had had its fall,

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<sup>3</sup> I fear it is safe to say that the 'Anschluß' was welcomed by the majority of Austrians and the official claim that Austria was the first victim of Nazi-Germany is greatly misleading.

<sup>4</sup> I remember seeing a Soviet tourist bus. It struck me as very strange, almost as a case of visitors from an alien world out in space. Hungary may have been gray by Western standards, but I thought, closer to the West than to Sovietunion, from which we were separated by a chasm.

and it was very different. The most recent history of Hungary in general and Budapest in particular was far into the future when the book was written, but the author lived long, well into 2019, and one can speculate as how he viewed it. The sad fact remains. Budapest during its zenith days of 1900 was an important vibrant city well worth a trip (i.e. three stars according to Guide Michelin) nowadays I fear it is but an irrelevance outside its narrow region and at most worth a stop (one star)<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> One may, a bit irreverently, speak about the Disney aspect. Present Budapest is but a representation of Budapest, attractive to tourists mostly concerned with appearances. Once in my younger days on a railpass I met a young American in Salzburg. He dismissed it all as Disneyland, I was shocked, but I have to admit retroactively that he had a point.