

G. M. Tamás: I Went to the Nth Degree

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'68 wasn't just in Prague, but the whole world, in Paris, West Berlin, Berkeley and Chicago, Mexico and everywhere. The fact that today, fifty-three years later it's still being discussed is only proof of how remarkable it was. - Hungarian philosopher G. M. Tamás in conversation.

András Greff: Why don't we start your life story with your grandparents.

G. M. Tamás: My grandmother on my mother's side was still alive during the war; she was killed in Auschwitz, as well as one of my uncles and my aunts; I never got to know them, both my grandfathers died during the war, but I knew my father's mother, who didn't really like us. She was a spirited, smart, ruthless, tough woman, but as a boy I noticed that she didn't love my father, her son, so I resented her and we didn't get along.

Lajos Jánossy: What sort of cultural belt did the grandparents' generation fall under?

My grandfather on my father's side was a tailor in Székelyudvarhely [[1](#)], Transylvania. From a peasant background (like my grandmother); there were a lot of charcoal burners among our ancestors. He must have been quite an unusual tailor, he studied the trade in Germany and then Austria, like many others – but how this man with a rudimentary primary education ended up with a bookshelf full of Russian literature, Turgenevs and Tolstoys and Dostoevskys and Gorkis, I have no idea. He almost exclusively read Russian literature, that's what he liked. My father grew up in a simple house (still there today, maybe the last two-storey wooden house in the town) that had Chekhov, his absolute favourite, like many Hungarian intellectuals. It's interesting, by the way, that in the whole of Western Europe it's Dostoyevsky, but in Hungary it's Chekhov. Yes, the kisebb kanavász... Simpler. A sharp-eyed great artist, without any philosophy.

LJ: This environment gave your father the chance to become a first-generation intellectual.

My grandfather was happy that he wanted to go to university, and with incredible difficulty they did get him there. Meanwhile the economic crisis came. You can imagine, that during the depression, not many were ordering tailored suits in the town. My grandfather had an apprentice whom he had to let go, barely able to pay my father's tuition. My father had basic existential problems. At the same time, he was a professional footballer. Just imagine, he played for the Cluj Water Works team, and the professional part was that he got lunch in the canteen at the plant. He got lunch, no breakfast, he ate a hot meal at least once a day. He was terribly thin, there are pictures, he was often hungry. A meal a day isn't enough for a strong young man. That was all he got in Cluj. He left university for his first job offer, and only graduated after the war. He read Hungarian and Latin, he stayed a while for a low, discounted fee at "Saint Joseph's", officially known as the Báthory-Apor Seminary, Catholic students received residence in Cluj (my grandmother was a Calvinist). He became a journalist.

AG: Not long ago we interviewed Andrea Tompa, and she told us that her grandmother...

Who was my paediatrician...

AG: Was in prison with your mother, who said that the prison warden, at the news of the landings, stopped their train's departure to Auschwitz.

This is a bit romantic. All that happened was that when the Russians were approaching, the prison guards vanished and left the convicts. Nota bene, at that time the Arrow-Cross were still ruling in Northern Transylvania: it was extremely dangerous. There were no guards, the communist convicts were at the mercy of the frenzied violence. My mother had to hide, and once she was out, she hid for another three days. And I imagine the others did too. Indeed, I remember it well; Andrea Tompa's grandmother, who was my paediatrician, and whom for some reason everyone called *Kocka* ('Cube'), much later stopped me in front of the Unitarian College (then the Sámuel Brassai Secondary School), on the corner of Kossuth Lajos Street and Dávid Ferenc Street, and said: "I see your interests, and I hear what you're doing, but the soul needs nourishment, too, my boy, not just the mind, and there are three books that every boy must read. Turgenev: *A Sportsman's Sketches*, Dickens: *Little Dorrit*, and Gottfried Keller: *Green Henry*. Goodbye." This is what the movement left me at thirteen years old.

My father was in prison, came home, back from the front, and that's when life started over again. It was an odd life, because the Soviet command ordered the Romanian state out of Northern Transylvania, they didn't want conflicts inside the front. So for a year in Northern Transylvania the local communist intelligentsia was in power. The poor sods imagined that's how it would last. János Demeter who later became the Hungarian university's vice-rector, was the mayor, while another of my father's friends, the Romanian physicist Teofil Vescan who spoke Hungarian as well as you and I, was the deputy mayor. The Hungarian university and the Romanian university were established, nationally speaking, efforts to rebuild were modest because they had no money until 6 March 1945, when the Groza government was formed and the Romanian civil service marched in. Until then they handled matters themselves, according to their own design, based on experiences from the Weimar Republic, Austro-Marxist ideas, and the history of Red Vienna (1918-1934). They didn't know that Generalissimo Stalin didn't see things quite the same. They had no information. None of them had been to the Soviet Union. They discovered Marxism in Paris, Vienna, Prague, and Berlin (or Strasbourg for László Szabédi). There were already certain problems with the comrades who opposed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1940.

My family was hugely lucky, in the sense that my parents' political "career" was wide open in front of them but they decided otherwise. All her life my mother had wanted to be a theatre nurse and there was a vacancy in the railway hospital, so she went to work there and stayed until she retired. That was one, the other was when they were offered a villa, my dad was leaning towards accepting it, but my mum said no chance. It'll come at a price. No. So we lived all our lives in a one-bedroom flat. My bed in the kitchen was separated by a card divider. I slept there when I was bigger.

LJ: The stories which were part of the family mythology, did you hear those and learn those from your father?

The old ones, the rest I lived myself.

LJ: There were no silenced sectors, no mute areas...

This wasn't Hungary.

LJ: A crucial difference.

I came to Budapest at the age of thirty, and a number of liberal intellectuals explained that as adults their parents told them, or it was revealed by chance, that they were Jewish. I didn't know this happened, that it could be a secret, I'd never heard of such a thing. There were lots of Jews around us at home, too, there was never word of denying it or keeping it quiet. But this is Hungary. There's nothing like it anywhere else in the world.

AG: How did your father's perspective on life, his mood change in the fifties? Was he disappointed, did he feel deceived?

My mum and he were peeking through the blinds for the black car. Like everyone else. The terror didn't spare the local party members. Quite the opposite.

AG: What was their survival strategy?

Terror. They had no survival strategy whatsoever. No one did. What survival strategies are there in a totalitarian system? Blind luck. After he was thrown out of the theatre, my father was made a kind of clerk in the cultural centre in Luduş. A typical Romanian market town. My father didn't know Romanian, not a single word. He lived his life in Romania without knowing Romanian. My mother too. My mother learned a few set phrases in the hospital, "turn over", "I'll give you the anaesthetic now". And then my poor father was there and couldn't come to Cluj. I travelled out to him on the horrific, unforgettable, horrific train. He lived in the local council's boarding house. Picture six beds in one room. Drunken comrades arrived from the centre of the province, Târgu Mureş, spent the night, and my father had to sleep there with them. He was the only permanent resident, the rest always changed. They didn't let him sleep.

LJ: Before we get to 1968, I don't want to leave out another year: 1956. What effect did the Hungarian '56 have on your family?

Much less than 68.

LJ: But why?

It wasn't so clear. At least, as best as I can remember, I was a boy at the time, eight years old. And we didn't see anything, we just heard the broadcast on the Budapest radio and the BBC Hungarian broadcast which mum and dad listened to night and day. My parents were happy that Mátyás Rákosi had bugged off, they hated him. They were waiting for Gerő to bugger off too, and they really did want change, they were strong supporters of the 20th Congress of the CPSU. But then Köztársaság Square happened. And that was that.

LJ: That had a lot of weight to it...

I remember in school the children talking, people gathering on street corners, there was uneasiness, and then came the reprisals and the terror. A lot of people were taken away again. This hurt, but the people knew – though until the premier of János Térey's and András Papp's play *Kazamaták* (2016) it was taboo – how dangerous 1956 was (like all revolutions of course). And that there was a darkness to it (like to all revolutions).

Getting back to '68: in Romania for a while the customary censorship disappeared, leaving the way open for (among other things) Romanian nationalism, moreover, for fascism that hadn't previously existed. This wasn't initially intentional. The signs had been there, but the rehabilitation of the Antonescu regime began in Romania in the late sixties, early seventies, while in Hungary, similar movements only began to stir in the mid-eighties.

LJ: The upside and downside of no censorship.

Yes, well that's what it produced. I was there in Bucharest in '68, when General de Gaulle escaped the Parisian '68. He gave a long speech at the university, I was there. He said: young friends, follow Nicolae Ceaușescu, your national leader. That was at the university; the old left-wing and solidarity with the colonised peoples and feminism and the movement to abolish nuclear weapons. De Gaulle wasn't the only one to call the Romanian people's attention to this, President Nixon did, too, in his famous speech at the airport. There was some truth to the Hungarian nationalists' words when they said that a Little Entente could form again. And this had a huge effect on many Hungarian intellectuals who, at this imaginary threat, became open to the Soviets, because Hungary was open to the Soviets, so they were too. In Transylvania, you had to be brave to take a stance in support of Prague's occupation, or not to sign the officially supported protests against Soviet aggression. And so '68 wasn't just in Prague, but the whole world, in Paris, West Berlin, Berkeley and Chicago, Mexico and everywhere. The fact that today, fifty-three years later it's still being discussed is only proof of how remarkable it was. It had different dimensions from '56, which abroad – not only in the West – was purely an eastern-European, "Soviet" matter, and didn't give rise to much sympathy in the world, which is of course unfair, but not impossible to understand.

LJ: When did you begin to think of yourself as a philosopher? Or do you think of yourself as such?

I thought of myself as a student of philosophy. To this day I don't think of myself "in genres" – I write all sorts. What am I? Once in the 1980s I spoke in Paris with Cornelius Castoriadis, whom both the Nazis and the Stalinists wanted to murder as a Trotskyist during his youth in Greece, and who at the time was vehemently anti-Soviet, beside his great theoretical works you might say he was an anti-communist political commentator, and I asked him, how would he put it? What was his genre? Philosophy? Political theory...? What would he call himself? He said curtly: "*Un révolutionnaire*."

AG: If I remember correctly, you write somewhere that your father played a key role in your coming to Hungary in 1978.

Well, Dad certainly pressured me to come, yes. He was just afraid for me. I wasn't so convinced about the whole thing, he kept on at me, to come, come, come.

LJ: Was there anything that surpassed your hopes, and anything that didn't meet your expectations?

I didn't come to Budapest, I came to the Budapest democratic opposition. That's a simplification, of course, but nothing more, not a falsification. I could have gone much more easily to Paris. My uncle lived there; he was a worker in the Renault factory. Originally he was a locksmith's apprentice in Cluj. Gaining admittance would have been easy. Gaining admittance from the Hungarians, on the other hand, was more difficult. The Romanians meanwhile would have gladly let me go to Paris, no question.

LJ: So the authorities didn't want you to come here.

Of course. It took four years. Whereas I could have gone to Paris in two months under the rules at the time, because my uncle qualified as a first relative.

LJ: Why did you stick to Budapest?

Because of the Hungarian intelligentsia and the language... the customs. My thinking was, I write in Hungarian and if there is another place other than home, in Budapest, where I can do this, then let's

give it a go. And then later there was a point when I thought I would leave here. Not long before the regime change. I had an English wife back then and two English children. At the time I believed Hungarian democracy had to be built and so I came back. What we imagined was democracy seemed interesting for a moment, let's say. But it cost me my family life.

Getting back to when I came here at the end of the sixties: without a doubt I thought I had some idea of Budapest, of Hungary, but of course in many regards this turned out to be wrong. As you all know well, this is a very complicated city which intrigued me, so I tried out all sorts of milieu, I made friends with all sorts of people, but my surroundings still consisted primarily of members of the opposition, social scientists, philosophers, and other suchlike people. Which was good because it turned out that there were plenty of things we could agree on, or at least talk about. There were lots of intelligent people with whom I was happy to talk. From whom I learnt a huge amount, and with whom I had great arguments, anyway, from many perspectives it was brilliant, but it wasn't perfect bliss, it was pervaded by many disputes and the rivalries and jealousies typical of a group forced into a tight space. But not so serious that I was bothered. Of course it wasn't pleasant to be let go so soon, and then came poverty and uncertainty. I don't enjoy living in dilapidated, stubbornly dirty flats as much as the next man, but at least I had a roof over my head.

AG: When could you first go back to Cluj, or when did you go back?

I could go back immediately. And then in 1980 I was arrested and deported.

LJ: Was there any specific reason?

They didn't say. The main reason was that I am who I am. They said I was banned from entering forever – forever! I still dream about it. It was terrible. For ten years, from 1980 to 1990 I couldn't go back. I had a recurring, grotesque dream that my darling little son Ábel is standing on the platform, and I'm sitting on the train, it's night-time, the train pulls out, and he's left there on his own. I'm stuck on the train, the cabin is locked, and he's alone, a little boy – he was five or six then – standing on the platform, the train pulling out, and he gets smaller and smaller. It was an awful dream. I dreamt that for years, over and over; a true nightmare, I woke up screaming.

LJ: If you think back on your books, from *The Prospects for Theory: Essays and Reviews* until the current *Antithesis*, how much do they reflect a particular stage or mindset in your life? It's difficult of course for an author to answer that, but you're a reflexive type.

Well, when it comes to these sorts of things, not so much. I don't usually reread my old writings. To the extent that I forget them. I'm occupied by what I'm writing at the time. Now.

LJ: Understandable.

What I do know though, is that the conservative deviation in my own career really was deviation, an episode. Which I don't consider shameful or regrettable, though I certainly could do, I'm not perfect either. There was a lot of anger and desperation in it. In this I believe I was average. A whole generation went to the right: think of the "New Philosophers" in France, to cite a simple example. An enormous number of the new left became new conservatives, or even worse. In Germany on the extreme right there are more than a few sixty-eighters, in America, in Great Britain, again on the hard right. This was caused partly by disappointment, anger, and by the left at the time who was in solidarity with the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, and with a load of terrible third-world movements, as a result of which, one could say, the left's story had come to an end, it couldn't go any further. I'm not uninformed, I knew perfectly well that there were other kinds of left-wingers, with whom I remained throughout, even in my most reactionary stages. To this day I'm in touch with

the French anarchist group which in the 1980s published my work *The Eye and the Hand* in French translation. It was a very friendly little group, all workers. I'm not the usual anti-intellectual intellectual, I don't think that intellectuals are good for nothing, that only the workers are good, that's rubbish. But as it happens, they were terrifically kind. They were a bit younger than me, the ones who heard there was an anarchist here in Budapest, and came looking for me. I remember before they travelled home, one of my friends from this group came over, and brought me 500 or 600 francs. That was a lot of money. And I said, don't be stupid, you're workers... Clearly, he'd collected the leftover money from everyone. And I'll never forget it, he said, "*c'est pour la cause*". In such a way I couldn't say no, so I pocketed the money. And I think I've never betrayed them, but in my views without a doubt I went in a conservative direction, and really that's why I became a significant figure in public life, because these views resonated with the Zeitgeist. Of course, I was hard-working then too, I looked into things and mulled over dilemmas, but I followed Hayek, Oakeshott, and later Strauss.

Bálint Modor: In an interview back then you were introduced as a staunch Thatcherist.

Of course. I'm a radical type, so I went to the nth degree. I didn't become a fascist, I turned towards libertarianism. Anger against socialism – in the term's historical sense – flowed through me. That they ruined the lives of my parents' generation, that they ruined all sorts of things, caused disappointment, there was oppression, the whole thing was a catastrophe, and they still hadn't learned – I'd had enough. Many others shared the feeling at the time. It was the generation of the regime change, where many of us were anti-communists. Each in our own way, but we were, nonetheless. And it was this that created a certain community of people I wouldn't gladly talk to today. Not because I hate them or I look down on them, but because we'd have nothing to talk about. If I had to have a chit-chat with József Antall today, what the bloody hell what I talk about with him? But back then we did find topics.

LJ: How lonely are you in Hungary now?

Not very. On the one hand, there is a young left-wing, whose members are different from myself, there's a big generational difference, they are forty-fifty years younger than me, but at least they're there. So now I have young friends, there are people who are interested in my views, a lot of articles are published about my books...

LJ: In HVG you had a text a couple of years ago, you reacted to a György Spiró interview, where you harshly critiqued the past 30 years of Hungarian literature. Now how do you feel about contemporary Hungarian literature as a reader?

I don't really read literature now.

AG: Since when?

For years. But now actually I am starting to read again because my girl, Hanna, who's now sixteen years old, has got interested in literature and brings home all sorts of books. Balázs Simon's collected works, and so on, and I do look at those because I'm curious about what she likes. She brought all sorts that I didn't like, but I still took a look... By all means, I won't deny that there are interesting things. But there were big disappointments as well. I could mention a few painful examples, but what for. But I don't read philosophy any differently from how others read poetry. I get a lump in my throat, tears in my eyes, rising anger, fear. And I feel I have to reread everything, I understood nothing correctly. I'm at the start of my career, as a hesitant, self-conscious, perhaps not entirely talentless beginner. From new philosophical-historical works I learn how little I knew or understood. That's what inspires me, because maybe finally now...

LJ: And do you read foreign literature? Russian, Spanish, anyone?

Incidentally, Russian and Spanish are two I don't read. I did read the new Handkes. His mind has totally gone. It's great. Totally. But that's it, period, he's gone absolutely mad, properly mad, really. And getting better and better.

AG: But you could deduce as much from his political steps for a while now.

It depends. He was right and still is that the majority of European public opinion and Western governments were biased against Serbian nationalism. We mourned every casualty except the NATO-bombed Serbians. It's a very odd thing. The fact that Handke then pushed this beyond proportion and stood up for hated Serbian figures – just for the sake of it – is clearly not correct. But it's not pure eccentricity and capriciousness, merely a sense of justice exercised to the point of madness, mischievous fair-mindedness, absurdity in response to humiliation, and noble, that's to say, quixotic protest. But then I like Don Quixote.

András Greff

Lajos Jánosy

G. M. Tamás, often referred to in the media as TGM, is a Hungarian marxist-anarcho-syndicalist philosopher and public intellectual. He is currently a contributor to online newspaper [Mérce](#) and to [OpenDemocracy](#), where he writes primarily about political and aesthetic questions. In Hungarian he has published several books on political philosophy and social theory, and his works have been translated into 12 languages. He has published one book in English: *Innocent Power* (2011, Hatje Cantz Verlag). His latest publication in Hungarian is *Antitézis* ('Antithesis'), published by Pesti Kalligram in 2021, a collection of new studies and others previously published in journals, including several Marxist political-philosophical studies originally written in English. In French, Tamás published *L'Oeil et la main: Introduction à la politique*, Geneva, Switzerland: Éditions Noir.

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P.S.

This article is an abridged version of the two-part interview published in Hungarian on Litera: [Elmentem a falig](#), in which G. M. Tamás answered the questions of Litera editors András Greff, Lajos Jánosy, and Bálint Modor. The interview was translated from the Hungarian by Owen Good.

HLO - Hungarian Literature Online

<https://hlo.hu/interview/g-m-tamas-i-went-to-the-nth-degree.html>

Footnotes

[1] Romanian: Odorheiu Secuiesc