

NO. 527

"B-5" FACESHEET AND RATING

ML

p. 1

October, 1957
Oxford, England

1. LL-1
- 2.
- 3.
4. 23
5. M
6. Hungarian
7. Reformed Church
8. Reformed Church (Jewish origin)
9. Single
- 10.
11. Student, writer, (poet)
12. None
- 13.
14. Middle
- 15.
16. Poland
- 17.
- 18.
19. Eotvös Loránt University (Budapest)
20. Budapest
21. Budapest
22. Pest
- 23.
24. 1956
25. Oxford, England
26. No
- 27.
- 28.
- 29.
31. "9"
32. "8"
33. "9"
34. None

I was born in Budapest in 1934^{member} of an ineffectual bourgeois family. My father had a peculiar career; he started out as a journalist and then went to seed. He was in the forced labor battalion during the war because of his Jewish origin. Although of Jewish origin, I am a member of the Reformed church. I don't know what we lived on when I was a child. My mother wrote dime novels, had a textile business, wrote articles under an assumed name - it was a confusing business. In 1945, my father and mother were divorced, and my mother married a planter. Before the siege of Budapest I was in a boarding school and then for awhile I lived with my parents with assumed papers. I attended the Sárospatók Gymnasium for one year and the Reformed Gymnasium for another year, and graduated from the Berzsenyi Gymnasium in 1953.

When did I start to write? I wrote my first poem when I was eight years old, staying with an aunt who lived in a small village. She was a very strict woman, and one day when I was forced to eat some carrots which I hated, I wrote a poem in denunciation of carrots. She ^{saw the poem,} ~~came to see it,~~ and to my great surprise she thought it very funny. It was then that I found out that poetry was a worthwhile and exciting business. When I was sixteen years old, I entered a poetry contest celebrating the liberation of Hungary. My poem was an imitation of Mayakovsky, like everybody else's. I didn't win, however; Imre Takács did. In 1951 and '52 I started

writing fairly decent stuff, even some love poems. I won a prize at the Berzsenyi Literary Society for my poems. In 1952, I started to attend the meetings of FIM (Fiatal Irók Munkaközössége) - ^{(Workshop} ~~association~~ of Young ~~Writers~~ Writers), that abstinent Party brothel. Here everyone was ab ovo imbued with partinost, and if somebody was not a Party member the older ones would say: "But you want to be a Party member, don't you?" One had an unconscious urge to conform to ^{the} prevailing atmosphere. We all worked in the youth movement. Actually, I never wanted to be a Party member and I prepared an answer in case somebody suggested my entering the Party. I would say: "I am not worthy to be a Party member, because I am contaminated with idealist elements." This was the only way one could answer their importunities, and furthermore it was true. I was never a materialist. We were up to our necks in the lukewarm puddle of partinost. We read bad poems at the meetings, poems which couldn't be better because of the aesthetic narrowing down process which had taken place. I was called decadent for some unknown reason. Eörsi was the top man in FIM at ~~this~~ this time. He wrote a poem about working in Széchenyi ^{it had} a line of which went like this: "The red rose of labor bloomed in his palm." I remember ~~one~~ smacking our lips over this gem. I found Eörsi extremely disagreeable, playing the big-shot, arrogant and overbearing. His first poem appeared in Csillag which was quite a thing at this time.

He put on an act about being the perfect Party member, his manner, his shirt open at the neck, all proclaimed the exemplary poet of the proletariat. Everybody was an automaton. When I went to my first meeting of FIM, Lőrinc Szabó was there which was quite a sensation since he never attended Writers' Association meetings. The entire FIM was a tremendous experience for me at first. There were ideological debates, conferences, prepared in advance, about partiinost in Soviet literature, etc. At this time, Bajai, that awful character, was head of the Writers' Association's education department to which FIM belonged. Bajai was a shady, untalented, stupid, mediocrity, his mouth twitching under a black moustache. A "funkci"*. When I said I was interested in the Soviet writers of the twenties, Bajai gave me hell because I had said something ~~was~~ which was not on the agenda, because I had a "perversely individual idea". Zelk criticized my poetry in the accepted k jargon. I remember a very bad love poem in which I said that I loved my sweetheart the way a bear loves raspberries. Zelk said that this comparison was wrong k because it was dehumanizing. All of this was in 1952. My first poem was ~~was~~ published in 1953, in an anthology about the liberation. This poem told the truth. It was January when I came out of the cellar after the liberation. The poem was about a little boy who was cold, freezing, and yet happy because he was free. It was criticized by Péter Nagy and others who claimed that this poem was not true, because k a child

(* functionary)

could not^{yet} be so aware of the meaning of the liberation. I ~~just~~ told them, truthfully, that I was. I think it is typical of certain Party members that they didn't realize that 1945 meant freedom. They didn't feel free until 1948 when the Party actually took over. To ~~them~~ the Russians were as bad as the Germans.

(Interviewer's Note: At this point Respondent Number 508 who was present at this interview broke in and said: "I don't think ~~that~~ that was the reason for their criticism. I think they found fault in this poem because they ~~it~~ criticized poetry with a cold logic, saying: 'this is a small child, ergo he cannot understand...'. This was criticism according to partiinost. That's ^{why} a Party poem couldn't be a good poem because it required cold logic. Benjamin alone was an ~~an~~ exception to this rule."

Respondent:

FIM, which was part of the Writers' Association education department, was started in 1950, and dissolved in the summer of 1953. The education department was continued until the end, and in the fall of 1951, the Writers' Association established ^a/DISZ organization which took over the functions of FIM when the latter was discontinued. FIM was a phony organization⁺ and not too many people attended. It was, however, a first step towards full-fledged membership in the Writers' Association. Here one could meet writers and editors. It was the first step on the way up in the ~~the~~ literary hierarchy. It enabled members to receive money from the literary fund, to have their works published in anthologies, and to receive summer jobs

(* gitt egylet)

either in Sztálinváros or with one of the publications. For instance, in 1953, I worked for Szabad Ifjúság. In 1953, with Szeberényi and Erdős, a reform spirit entered FIM.

One of the standard methods of criticizing a poem was to say, if one didn't make any illusions to American imperialist germ warfare: "You could just as easily have written this twenty years ago ...". Here Respondent Number 508 interposed again saying: "They ruined young writers because they treated us, they expected us to perform, like arrived, finished, big, poets. They demanded a finished product from us, as though we were all Mayakovsky. They didn't realize that we were young, and had to find ourselves and experiment. They wanted us to be polished, epigons of partiinost. The result was a large number of beautifully ~~and~~ polished dilettante poems. One always had a feeling of inferiority, thinking: 'I didn't succeed again..' One wrote with one's brain and not with one's emotions. We were forced to be 66th rate like the Soviet poets."

Here Respondent took over again: "I only made one friend in FIM who is now imprisoned in Szeged. There were a few talented people there; ^{Feri} Nemeth wasn't bad, but Sándor Csóri was the most talented. Jóska Tuli, a talented decent peasant boy was attacked and abused because he wrote something about ^a ~~the~~ middle peasant who hanged himself rather than enter a collective farm. He had a long drooping moustache. He and some others who were treated the same way didn't write anything for years. I saw Tuli three

years] later at the Petöfi Circle ^{press} debate when he muttered angrily: 'These scoundrels, not even the Turks treated the country as badly as they are treating it, etc.' I lost interest in FIM as soon as my first few poems appeared in print. My first poem was published in 1953, in an anthology issued by Szabad Ifjúság. In the same year I ~~also~~ received a three month scholarship to Poland, and was admitted ^{to} the University. Poland was tremendously exciting to a nineteen year old boy. I was sent to Poland as a 'young poet' and had the the opportunity to meet the really great Polish poets, ^{Wazyk and others.} I knew a little Polish, and everybody was extremely nice to me. It was here that I discovered the West through the French emigré Communist community living in Warsaw. Although they were Communists, they were Western Communists. In Hungary their views would have been considered wildly reactionary. If I had heard these views from a former rich merchant I would not have believed them, but hearing them from a Western Communist they were credible. I saw things here, and heard things, which gave me a basis for comparison. I also translated Polish poetry into Hungarian. After I returned, there was a very exciting meeting of young writers on October 29, 1953 (?)^{*} after the introduction of the new course. The revolt of the writers began here - well, & actually it is difficult to say where it began. It began in 1953, when people ~~are~~ were allowed to open their mouths, etc. Everybody unburdened ^{himself.} ~~themselves.~~ ~~Here;~~ In fact, our meeting was the first

* (note: possibly 1954)

one where people could talk openly, because at this time the Writers' Association didn't hold any meetings, and because we, the young writers, were angrier and more thoughtless. We attacked, ~~we~~ ^{UJ} ~~the~~ Hang and Csillag the two literary periodicals, we attacked the regime's literary policies, as well as Rákosi's cultural and economic policies. Csóri debated the question of why can't we tell the truth, why can't we be sincere? Tuli, addressing the regime, said: 'You ought to trust us, we are not counter-revolutionaries. If you don't trust us, whom can you trust?' After this meeting, I wrote my poem The Thaw which wasn't published until January, 1955. There was a big debate at the University about it. The whole thing had a thaw atmosphere about it. It was only then that I realized what had been happening. In 1953, I didn't know what it was all about and needed a year to let it all sink in, to see that what the regime had ^{created} ~~was~~ was the lowest infamy. Also, now it was possible to talk about this openly, as it was not before. Until the spring of 1954, I didn't realize what had really happened. Then I had a drastic argument with an uncle of mine who was a ~~st~~ ~~functionary~~ functionary.

"In March, 1955, we started a writers' group at the University whose members included Imre Takács, László Márton, István Szabó, Ormay, Ladányi, György Hars and x myself. Eörsi read us his radical poem attacking Rákosi. Imre Nagy prevented its ~~pub~~ publication in the literary column of Szabad Ifjúság feeling that it might

cause a panic. We held our first meeting in March, 1955. It was very interesting, because there had been no real literary activity at the university for a long time. Takács read his Hajdusági Naturalizmus - Hajkus (Hajduság Naturalism) which had a tremendous success; it acted like a bomb. Subsequently Takács and Ladányi were attacked by Esti Budapest. Our second meeting was in December 1955. Much has happened since then. Hars ^{has become} ~~became~~ a ^a Kadarist, as ^{has} ~~was~~ Ladányi who had participated in the Revolution. Ormay, Márton and I are here in Oxford. And Takács is silent, although a poem of his was published recently. There were other young writers at the University: Imre ^{Györe} ~~Györe~~, whom we hated, and who is now ~~writing~~ ^{working} for Élet és Irodalom - (Life and Literature), ^{is} an untalented hack. It is clear that in his case, our ("osztályszimat") "our class instinct" did not betray us. There was also Máté whom ~~nobody~~ nobody took seriously. At the end of 1955, Hars, Márton and I held a reading of our ~~works~~ at the Eötvös Club. In November, 1955, there was the meeting of young artists at which actors, musicians, poets, etc., performed. By then the regime had declared open war on the writers. It was at this meeting that Takács recited his (Halalsirató) Lament for the Dead, and Eörsi his Julien Sorel in Prison, a wild, raging poem attacking the regime. It was a fantastic success. In these days there was always something interesting going on. In 1956, Egyetemi Ifjúság started to publish an interesting series of articles on politics, literature, etc.

László Endrődi, a former grocer, a rather untalented Party creature who had brains enough to see which way the wind was blowing, was responsible for this. Today, he is in Australia. And, of course, Eörsi had a great deal to do with this new liberal trend of Egyetemi Ifjúság. There was, for instance, a debate about abstract painting in which I participated, writing that it should, of course, be allowed. I was attacked but there were three statements in defense of my position.

"At the December, 1955, meeting of the University writers' group, it became clear that our former unity was beginning to disintegrate for personal reasons. There were also some political reasons but these were not too significant. These were exciting days. There was the Petőfi Circle, and so on. We circulated poems which were not allowed to be published such as the manuscript of Benjamin's Thus We Are - (Igy Vagyunk), and the translation of Wazyk's poem for adults. There were three translated copies ^{of the latter}. One of them was circulated by Déry, the other by me, and I don't know who had the third. I also translated interesting things from the Polish press and circulated these. We wanted to publish ^{papers} two newspapers at the University. The first would have been With a pure heart (Tiszta Szíve) published by Máté and his group, a bunch of untalented dilattantes. Our group wanted to publish the other newspaper entitled The Air - (Levegőt) (Interviewer's Note: Taken from Attila József's poem) which would have been better. Our first issue was

ready when László Kéri, whose job it was to supervise us for the Party Committee, tried, with the best of will, to unite the two newspapers. On October 22, we held a meeting to decide on this after which we held a demonstration meeting and voted against union. Our paper had wild things in it, pretty extreme stuff artistically, and came all out for the freedom of the artist.

Political Views. After the war, I tended towards the Left, politically partly because my father had been a member of the Communist Party and my mother was a Social Democrat. I think that I felt somewhat more favorably inclined toward the Social Democrats, although I was unable to think of any objections against the Communists. For ten years they stuffed me with the statement that ~~there~~ there were only two choices: Communism or ^{Fascism} ~~Fascism~~. This prevented my free development, and ^{meant} a certain limitation, ^{and restricted my development}. In 1951, I felt that Communists were certainly better ~~than~~ than the Fascists you might say that I was a Communist sympathizer, "a solidarizer," although I was never a Communist Party member. Slowly ^{but} surely this view started to fade out in me. But I was always willing to listen to opposing points of view, and to reactionary jokes. In 1953-1954, my illusions started to break up, and things slowly started to peel off me. I changed my views on the basis of my readings, my own thinking, the views of the people ~~of~~ around me, the debates of my friends. My step-father used to abuse the regime and I suddenly realized that he was right. In 1951 or 1952, when

I read the Magic Mountain, the characters of Naphta and ^{Settembrini} ~~re-~~ enforced my view that there was no other choice than Fascism or ~~and~~ Communism. Later on, in debates with my friends, we realized that if we took the Hungarian traditions seriously, if we really believed in March, 1848, in the tradition of an independent Hungary, then we must strongly disapprove of the existence of Russian troops in Hungary. I realized that if we really believed in our national traditions, then we must act instead of merely attacking a few idiots in the government, or the "temporary state of terror." In other words, I came to understand what the fundamental problem was. To me rational arguments were always less important than emotional ones. Thus, in 1954, I developed in myself a counter ideology, impelled chiefly by emotional arguments.