

Let's Turn Hegel from His Head onto His Feet: Hopes, Myths, and Memories of the 1960s in Tamás Cseh's Musical Album "A Letter to My Sister"

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The year 1968 is a symbol of social and protest movements with global reverberations, centered, primarily, in the United States and western Europe. No less importantly, 1968 has been linked to the Prague Spring's promise of a renewal of socialism "with a human face." "1968" witnessed the climax of revolutionary upheaval and societal reform efforts. In this paper, I will focus on some salient and unique features of the "sixties" through the rear-view mirror of a Hungarian popular musical album that memorialized it. The choice of addressing a time and place via popular music rests on the assumption that in the memory work of the "imagined community" of a generation, the experiences and "truths" of an era are constructed in and through significant cultural texts. These texts may carry extraordinary significance because they capture essential experiences and sentiments associated with a specific place, historical time, and the identity of the community that inhabited and shaped them. The music listeners' perceptions of the time/place referenced in the text become amalgamated with their own unique memories and impressions that were formed by a set of other texts as well. For the following generations, the time/space tends to be imagined and appreciated, primarily, through these significant texts.

The album "A Letter to My Sister" (1977) by the composer-performer Tamás Cseh with János Másik (singer, instrumentalist, composer), János Novák (composer, musician), and Géza Bereményi (lyricist), has been enjoying an enduring cult status in Hungarian popular music and youth culture.¹ In 2014, the "Letter" was listed as the second of the "Thirty Best Hungarian Albums of All Time" by the weekly *Heti Világgazdaság*, which represents an older educated demographic; the third of the outstanding twenty-five albums on the list of the youth-oriented online lifestyle journal *Nullahategy*, and included in its top fifty by the mainstream national Pop Music Station "Radio Petőfi."

Tamás Cseh (1943–2007) is one of Hungary's most lionized popular musicians. His career spanned close to four decades. A multi-talented artist, he acted on film and in theater, as well as released sixty-two short and long-playing records in collaboration with a range of fellow musicians and actors. His prominence is most closely linked with Bereményi, a co-author of most of his works. While Cseh's voice and performance style was unique, his rise to fame in the early 1970s cannot be separated from broader art movements of Hungary. Young people were particularly prominent in this cultural

1. Cseh, T., Másik, J., Novák, J., and Bereményi, G. *Levél nővéremnek* (Budapest, 1977). The album may be accessed on YouTube displaying the image of the original LP's sleeve: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1_8vh-c4Us&list=PLvRZyNH11MPHd5dBlqo4M4Y8QpHo9JEJN (last accessed October 10, 2018).

effervescence, freely crossing the boundaries between poetry and rock, rural and urban folk, as well as engaging in experimental theater. The rich cultural landscape of the 1960s and 70s, as well as its complex, often deleterious, relationship with state power has been uncovered by a growing number of publications.² Unlike other more politically or aesthetically radical talents, Cseh could find his niche throughout the 1970s and 80s. In the postsocialist era, he won the highest national and cultural awards. A statue in his memory was inaugurated in Budapest in 2013 and an archive established to celebrate his oeuvre.

In the late 1970s, the University Stage (*Egyetemi Színpad*) run by the Eötvös Loránd University of Budapest held an evening displaying “A Letter to My Sister.” Sitting on a low chair in the center of a darkened stage, Cseh performed chanson-like pieces with an acoustic guitar, at times joined by the vocalist Másik, who also played the electric guitar and the keyboard. The arrangement of the songs was sparse. The ambience was novel to me, familiar as I was with more exuberant rock and folk music events. The *magizdats* of Bulat Okudzhava and Vladimir Vysotskii, however, had been known to me. Cseh’s songs exuded a melancholy reminiscent of Russian bards but they portrayed a young person of Budapest, immersed in the musical world of rock and blues, as he chronicled the adventures and musings of a character who had grown up in communist Hungary. Everything about “him” was immediately familiar to me.

To what, however, does the album owe its cult status for four decades? How can its enduring and multigenerational popularity be explained? Each song of the “Letter” is a small vignette of images, stories, and drama fragments surfacing from the character’s past connected with a report on his daily life. Different time settings are juxtaposed, cohering into a contemplative narrative. The character’s present-day experiences as a young adult are set in the anticlimactic 1970s, whereas his politicized personal memories evoke his teenage years in the 60s and his childhood years reaching back to the 50s.

Based on textual analysis, I will argue that the “Letter” owes its success, first, to its unique chronological and narrative arch: the letter writer’s coming of age during the 60s historically coincides with significant shifts taking place

2. On the cultural movements and trends of the 60s and 70s, such as cinema, see Catherine Portuges, *Screen Memories: The Hungarian Cinema of Márta Mészáros* (Bloomington, 1993); Dina Iordanova, *Cinema of the Other Europe: The Industry and Artistry of East Central European Film* (London, 2003). On fine arts, see Edit Sasvári, Hedvig Turai and Sándor Hornyik, eds., *Art in Hungary 1956–80: Doublespeak and Beyond* (London, 2018). On folk and popular music, see Judit Frigyesi, “The Aesthetic of the Hungarian Revival Movement,” in Mark Slobin, ed., *Retuning Culture: Musical Changes in Central and Eastern Europe* (Durham, 1996), 54–75; Katalin Kovalcsik, “The Romani Musicians on the Stage of Pluri-Culturalism: The Case of the Kalyi Jag Group in Hungary,” in Michael Stewart and Márton Rövid, eds., *Multi-disciplinary Approaches to Romany Studies* (Budapest, 2011), 55–70; Eszter György, “A kisebbségi kulturális örökség létrehozásának kísérlete: A Rom Som cigányklub története (1972–80),” in Ádám Ignác, ed., *Populáris zene és államhatalom: tizenöt tanulmány* (Budapest, 2017), 209–38. Also László Kürti, *Youth and the State in Hungary: Capitalism, Communism, and Class* (London, 2002). For alternative art movements, see József Havasréti, *Alternatív regiszterek: A kulturális ellenállás formái a magyar neoavantgárdban* (Budapest, 2006).

in the country's economic, social, and cultural life. Therefore, the years of freedom and hope intrinsic to being a teenager in modern society were shaped and given additional meaning by the opening up of the country's political and cultural landscape. Second, the "Letter" offers a critique of socialism as it was lived and remembered. It has remained a personal and intimate portrayal of growing into adulthood in socialist Hungary and, more broadly, in socialist east central Europe.

The Fifties, the Sixties, and After

"The years succeed one another in an uncanny way" writes the subject to his sister, Irén, in the fourth segment of his letter whose date is deliberately left unmentioned. Through reflections, he tries to order and make sense of his place in a social world and shifting historical realities. Memories of and allusions to tangled relationships—with his father, teachers, girlfriends, workplace superiors, friends—come alive. In his mini-narratives of adventures and misadventures, visions, frustrations, fears, and longings, the so called "sixties generation" can readily recognize themselves, the unique conjunction of their biography and postwar Hungarian history; personal and social issues are inextricably enmeshed.

Of the twenty-three songs and fragments of the letter, merely one refers back to "the fifties"; its memory is triggered by an old family photo evoking—aside from a family drama—the politically depressed atmosphere. The album's affective focus, however, is "the sixties" portrayed with unabashed nostalgia, which, as Svetlana Boym argues in her influential study, is an "off-modern" historical emotion, "a symptom of our age." Nostalgia is "longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed." Besides being a sentiment of loss and displacement, "it is also a romance with one's own fantasy."³ The song entitled "The Sixties" portrays the era through the prism of fun summer vacations near Lake Balaton. The emergent youth culture appeared to ride the waves of Kadarist consolidation. The memories congeal into a sunny picture, a place/time worth revisiting. The song does not memorialize specific events or acts but rather an atmosphere filled with anticipation and liberation expressed through the joy of bodies in physical movement; movement from one place to another, across Lake Balaton, on the road as hitchhikers, and dancing the twist. Let me cite the lyrics:

In the sixties towards summer the youth problem grew severe
I remember as we took the boat every day from Almádi to Siófok.⁴
Oh, the old lake, oh Balaton, oh in those old summers, though we had no
sailboat
Oh, the old lake, oh on the terrace we were sitting in the summer watching over
the lake.
Even films were shot of young hitchhikers gazing back at us from the screen
Watching the lake's shiny surface while dancing the twist
and listening to the chattering of the bubbles . . .

3. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York, 2001), 1–3.

4. Names of resorts by Lake Balaton.

In the sixties the world was explained from ever widening perspectives
and reimagined through Kafka, Sartre, and distant sages
Refr. Oh the old, oh Balaton . . .
In ever-broadening rings the beautiful lake brought waves of consolidation.
I remember we crossed from Bélatelep to Révfülöp on a summer day
Refr. Oh the old lake, oh Balaton . . .⁵

As rock 'n' roll grew intensely popular among the young throughout the 60s, so did teenage looks, fashion, and use of media (mostly western radio stations) become subject to surveillance from the party-state and its apparatuses—from the Politburo to law enforcement, from the ministry of culture to the communist youth organization (KISZ). The scandals associated with youth gangs are narrated in Cseh's later albums, but in this song, only the first enigmatic line hints at the "youth problem." Eszter Zsófia Tóth and András Murai claimed that "[t]he [communist] party dreaded the thought of youth coupling with revolution in the wake of 1956."⁶ In his excellent discussion of youth culture and deviance, Sándor Horváth pointed out that the language of the moral panic in the "East" emulated western media discourse with unique twists. On the one hand, the so-called "hooligans" in socialist official rhetoric were treated as residual targets of "antifascist struggle" but also as modern enemies by virtue of being infected by western popular culture. A Hungarian youth magazine insinuated that hippies were mentally-ill, legitimizing its claim by quoting an American psychiatrist who stated: "The hippies are in fact psychiatric cases. Many of them are not only parasites and loafers, but as we call them, sociopaths or psychopaths"⁷

As the public outrage over long hair, unisex clothing, and the alleged primitiveness of beat music subsided, however, fascination and genuine curiosity arose within "adult society" about the young, especially those with solid middle-class backgrounds. Rather than their working-class peers, often criminalized and harassed by the police, they were the ones waving at "us" as hitchhikers on films; they displayed their ecstasy at a Saturday night rock 'n' roll concert or discussed it with journalists. Not unlike the "folk devils" of the west, the "beatniks" of Hungary were, by and large, domesticated as they became the "boys-and-girls-next-door," and their songs were hummed by plumbers and schoolgirls alike. Some of the best Hungarian-language beat music won the sympathy of media gatekeepers.⁸

5. See "The Sixties" ("A hatvanas évek") on the album Cseh, T., Másik, J., Novák, J., and Bereményi, G. *Levél nővéremnek* (Budapest, Hungaroton 1977). All the song lyric citations have been translated by me.

6. Cited by PZL in "1956 után a forradalom és az ifjúság összefonódásának gondolata megrémisztette a pártot." *Nullahategy*, May 1, 2018, at <https://nullahategy.hu/1956-utan-a-forradalom-es-az-ifjusag-osszefonodasanak-gondolata-megremisztette-a-partot-toth-eszter-zsofiaval-es-murai-andrassal-beszeltunk-az-1968-magyarorszagon-cimukonyvrol/> (last accessed October 2, 2018).

7. See Sándor Horváth "'Wild West,' 'Gangster,' and 'Desperado' Feelings: The Perception of the 'West' in Youth Subcultures in Hungary in the 1960s," *East Central Europe* 38, no. 2–3 (2011): 180–98.

8. András Kappanyos, "Az ellenkultúra domesztikálása," in *Populáris zene és államhatalom*, 54–72.

Beyond summer vacations and dance parties, the 60s, as Cseh's character relates, was a time of opening horizons and a cultural reawakening. A stroke of serendipity for the Hungarian teens and twenty-somethings was to experience the opening of their own minds at a time when the restrictive cultural policies and ideological dogmas were being partially lifted. Franz Kafka or Jean Paul Sartre may not have been on most youngsters' reading list, but they inspired many of the movers and shakers.

Along with "remote sages"—a reference to hippies' flirtation with eastern philosophies—such authors symbolize the intellectual face of "western" influence. As part of top cultural functionary György Aczél's three T policy (in English: prohibition, tolerance, and support), the green light was given to modernist cultural trends and artifacts previously dismissed for exemplifying bourgeois or imperialist decadence.⁹ In the terrain of popular culture, from music to theater, from fiction to television shows, popularity became a salient principle, eroding the political clout of socialist realism and Sovietized mass culture.¹⁰ Nonetheless, popular and youth culture remained vulnerable to intervention from above. The domestic media presence of the Hungarian rockers, for instance, could always be rescinded as the political climate changed.

Looking back from the 1970s, as the letter writer does, the fun-filled images come across as distant and faded. The narrative is self-consciously focused on gazes. Not only does the remembering subject gaze back to his past; he looks at the hitchhikers through their camera and at his younger self, watching them onscreen. Oddly, even the dancers of the twist are recalled as lost in contemplation in "watching the lake's shiny surface"! All these multiplied, refracted images render the beautiful summer memories as mythic fragments. Through self-reflective glances, the writer/performer seems to examine: what else was there in those summers besides desire, hope, and anticipation of change? Was the freedom "real"? Could the objects of the gaze—young people—be agents of change? Were they in charge of their own lives? The contrast between the optimistic lyrics and the melancholy of the music implies the subject's distance and disenchantment, an attitude echoing other post-1968 songs of the era.¹¹

Nostalgia is not always in a melancholic key in the "Letter." The lively, acoustic rock 'n' roll number titled "A Worldview Club" (*Egy világnézeti klub*) is woven through irony and humor. While the club's name intimates a socialist organizational oddity invented by KISZ to brainwash the young, the song's cheerful tone challenges such a simplistic interpretation. The song is about a group of "activists" (*aktivák*), a lifeless term coined by apparatchiks that was never absorbed by ordinary language users. The humorous effect of the piece is created by counterpointing the bureaucratic, wooden phrases with the casual, amused atmosphere of the gathering where the participants pass cigarettes to one another and drink coca cola, the formerly "sinful drink," now appearing as a symbol of measured westernization.

9. In Hungarian the "three Ts" stand for *tiltás, tűrés és támogatás*.

10. See Anikó Imre, "Adventures in Early Socialist Television Edutainment," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 40, no. 3 (2012): 119–30.

11. The best-known examples come from the recordings of the groups Illés and Fonográf, Zsuzsa Koncz, and Locomotiv GT, all released in the early 1970s.

This “worldview club” of the song departed from Stalinist-style political meetings of earlier times where speakers preached set truths to a passive audience. The coffee and cola-drinking crowd was now encouraged to pose questions and engage in debate, even though “a clear and compelling answer” could only be expected from the club leader, who happened to be our protagonist. The limits of the project to rethink “Marxism” were thus clearly determined.¹² The line “Let’s turn—how fun!—Hegel from the top of his head onto his feet” reeks with sarcasm. No doubt, more than a few cola drinkers were wary about the club’s ideological mission. Others, however, were portrayed as “smoking and puffing their cigarettes *earnestly*.”¹³ “Both ‘Marx’ and ‘Coca-Cola’ could represent resistance at the same time at the end of the 1960s,” according to Horváth, arguably stretching the concept of resistance too thin.¹⁴ Tóth and Murai, in contrast, believe that the import of Coca Cola was part of the regime’s conscious attempt to prevent the spread of left radicalism.¹⁵

The year 1968 marked the introduction of the New Economic Mechanism, viewed as the culmination of post-1956 consolidation, later nicknamed “Goulash socialism.” Following the crackdown on the Czechoslovak reform movement in 1969, hard-liners gained ground in the Hungarian party apparatus and economic reform came to a temporary halt. The song “A Coffee Joint” (*Presszó*) presents us with a grotesquely tragicomic scene.¹⁶ The main character is a fallen man introducing himself as Szeberényi, a “renowned economist” and “formerly the key figure of the economic reform.” The dialogue conducted between him and the *presszó*’s pianist draws on surrealist and absurdist literary traditions:

So a coffee joint. It’s noisy here, lots of shouting.
 My attention is caught by a man, a woman’s next to him.
 A wicked drink in front of him.
 He’s talking and talking and asking
 And I’m writing down everything he says:
 “What is this?”
 “This is a coffee joint.”
 “And you?”
 “I’m the pianist here.”
 “And me?”
 “You’re a guest.”¹⁷

12. I know this is a disputable position but I believe that the Marxism professed by the regime was a distorted and rigidified version of what social and political scientists would call Marxism. Hence the quotes.

13. After all, the fledgling New Left—both in the “East” and the “West”—interrogated the manner W. F. Hegel was re-appropriated by the young Karl Marx, see Gábor Kovács, “Revolution, Lifestyle, Power and Culture - Features of Political Thought in the Sixties,” in M. János Rainer and György Péteri, eds., *Muddling through in the Long 1960s: Ideas and Everyday Life in High Politics and the Lower Classes of Communist Hungary* (Trondheim, Norway, 2005), 27–52.

14. Horváth, “‘Wild West,’ ‘Gangster,’ and ‘Desperado’ Feelings,” 181.

15. “1956 után a forradalom és az ifjúság összefonódásának gondolata megrémisz-tette a pártot.” *Nullahategy*, online, as in n6.

16. The Hungarian word *presszó* is short for *eszpresszó*, which means both the coffee drink and the coffee house, where hard liquors are also served.

17. “A Coffee Joint” (“Presszó”) on the album “Letter.”

Interspersed in the conversation is a refrain, a tune similar to those played on a Wurlitzer. It pulls both the characters and the listeners into a whirl of drunk dizziness:

Refr. Hmmm . . . how fine.

What a fine place! Yes, a fine place . . . (repeated twice).¹⁸

From the exchange between Szeberényi and the pianist, it turns out that the former's talent and expertise was once rewarded, but after his fall from grace, his medals ended up in his drinking cup. Out-of-touch with his environs, yet desperate to escape them, he is fumbling for words but can only mumble splintered communist slogans:

I'm ready to contribute my talent and be productive
If there's never a closing time here, no one will do the task
This lecherous lifestyle, I'm afraid, is corrupting me
The hard-working community is awaiting me.¹⁹

Szeberényi's trajectory speaks to the trajectory of a number of creative intellectuals attempting "to explain the world from broader perspectives," deviating from Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. Some stayed and continued to work as dissidents, others emigrated and gained reputation abroad. The "presszó" stands as a metaphor of entrapment in a country bereft of public spaces for creative and critical thought.²⁰ Similarly to the song "The Sixties," where the "realness" of youth culture was questioned, the "Presszó" asks whether creative work and community had ever existed or were merely Mr. Szeberényi's delusion. Like the youths whose music and lifestyle were alternately labeled as either culture or a problem to be policed, the Szeberényis were vulnerable to the turning of the tide and of metamorphosing from decorated professionals into discarded nobodies.

The rest of the songs depict everyday life in post-1968 Hungary (post-Paris and post-Prague-Spring) through the experiences of the so-called "big generation" that, by this time, was trying to settle down, start families, struggle with marital issues, workplace scandals, and so forth.²¹ From what seemed promising on the road as a hitchhiker, exhilarating at a rock event, and stimulating in a debate club, almost nothing carried over into young adulthood. The song "There's Nothing Else" (*Nincsen más*) is a harrowing statement about the housing crisis Hungarians faced and its dramatic effect on couples who could not afford to separate as a result. In the "Conclusion of the Letter" to Irén, the protagonist laments over her social

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. For a wonderful analysis of the distinctive relationship between public and private spaces under socialism and their subversive uses, see Edit András's study on the work of neo-avantgarde artist Tibor Hajas, András, "Out of Private Public Opinion into Shared Personal Opinion: The Public, the Private and the Political," in *Art in Hungary 1956–80*, 64–84.

21. The generation that came of age in the late sixties and thus most actively participated in the local version of art and youth cultural, political, and lifestyle movements of the sixties and seventies has frequently been referred to as the "big generation."

isolation imposed by “GYES,” the multi-year maternity leave with childcare allowance, which most new working mothers were pressured to opt for. Childcare choices, like housing, were in short supply in socialist Hungary. Underlying a host of chronic social problems, troubled personal relationships, and non-existent public spaces, a larger question loomed: What is the reason why everything got stalled? The song “Budapest” addresses the perennial east central European dilemma of the disgruntled decisions as to whether to defect to the west or stay. The poignant debate between two voices, possibly within the subject’s head, implies that there is a huge price tag on both choices, which is made evident by songs like “Oneiromancy” (*Álomfejtés*), a surrealist Kafkaesque nightmare of feeling small, anxious, and existentially dispossessed.

The disillusioned or estranged adult or group of adults revisiting, with remorse and regret, their younger selves and thwarted hopes and ambitions is a well-known trope in modern fine and popular arts.²² The “Letter” grafts this trope onto the history of Hungarian socialism. The 60s, the affective center of the album, promises to be an exit from the traumatic childhood of the fifties, but the decade fails to deliver its promise. It is impossible to tell apart the failure of a generation from the failure of society, and of socialism. Viewed in this light, the long 60s (1956-to circa 1975) carries the legacy of the “short fifties”—the pre-1956 era—and more broadly, it marks the inability of east European socialism to develop its non-colonial, “human face.” In his review of collected essays on the “long sixties” Andrew Janos argued:

If we compare the experience of East and West [of Europe] in the “Sixties,” the differences will be far more conspicuous than the similarities. Whereas in the West the 1960s were the product of the sudden rediscovery of an old truth that prosperity comes with a price, in the Soviet bloc reformism was driven by the desire to catch up with this very source of Western turmoil. Because that goal required a modicum of personal autonomy and governmental restraint, the ideas of cultural revolution in the West just “chanced to slip under the Iron Curtain.”²³

Janos’s critique of the east’s experience of the 60s is insightful but reductive, especially by virtue of dismissing the accomplishments of artists, thinkers, dissidents, and dropouts, who created, in however limited a way, turmoil with their lives, deaths, and cultural artifacts. Into the ranks of these self-consciously marginal artists belonged the producers of “A Letter to My Sister.”

22. See, for instance, the films *The Big Chill*. Directed by Lawrence Kasdan. Hollywood, CA: Carson Production, 1983, and *Peter’s Friends*. Directed by Kenneth Branagh. UK: Channel Four Films, 1992; or the Hungarian classic short story *Meeting with a Young Man* (*Találkozás egy fiatalemberrel*, 1913) by Frigyes Karinthy, in Tamás Ungvári, ed., *Karinthy Frigyes Öszegyűjtött művei* (Online edited collection of short stories) at <http://mek.oszk.hu/06900/06980/06980.htm#22> (last accessed October 2, 2018).

23. Andrew C. Janos, review of *Muddling through the Long Sixties: Ideas and Everyday Life in High Politics and the Lower Classes of Communist Hungary*, eds., J. Rainer and G. Péteri, *Journal of Cold War Studies* 10, no. 4 (2008): 170–71.

As Julianne Fürst and Josie McLellan's collection of intriguing essays about the "dropouts" of socialist eastern Europe and Russia underscores, the immediate political futility yet inspired cultural productivity, ethical standards, and long-term historical relevance of the lives and unique accomplishments of the broadly-construed 60s generation in the region.²⁴

24. Julianne Fürst and Josie McLellan, eds., *Dropping out of Socialism: The Creation of Alternative Spheres in the Soviet Bloc* (Lanham, MD, 2017).