György Novák:

'BEFORE NOVEMBER ONE'

Ezra Pound and Tibor Serly

It is very difficult, indeed almost impossible to add anything of interest to the 'story' of Ezra Pound, one of the key-figures - and certainly the most controversial - in twentieth century English literature. It is a commonplace to start listing the books written about his works, chiefly *The Cantos*, and that I will not do, but instead refer the interested reader to a short bibliography at the end. The books written about his life number less. We have Charles Norman's account from the end of the fifties and Noel Stock's biography, the Penguin edition of which in 1974 goes up to the end and there are those works exploring certain aspects of Pound's career (e.g.: Davis, 1968; Heymann, 1976), or presenting various phases of his life (e.g.: Mullins, 1961; Norman, 1948; Cornell, 1966; Meacham, 1967;). Of the latter sort, most books deal with the last years he spent in the criminal lunatic ward of St. Elizabeths Hospital, in Washington D.C.

Very little has so far been published in Hungary about this highly significant poet-editor-organizer-translator, etc. which goes beyond the scope of chapters or passages in histories of literature, book reviews (not on HIS books, but on books about him!), lexicon litems, short

biographical notes or an obituary (e.g.: Kardos-Sükösd, 1964, 175-189; Országh, 1967, 278-280; *Nagyvilág*, 1973/1.).

The situation is even worse from the point of view of Pound's works themselves being published in Hungarian. On one hand, the quantity of the poetry translated is nearly negligible - discussing the *quality* of the translations should be the subject of a more extended essay -, while on the other, the material available in Hungarian is not representative of Pound's work. Of the earlier, shorter poems some 25 can be read in our language (in print), in some 35 versions, and all are from the first half of his almost 300 pages long *Collected Shorter Poems*. No full poem has been translated, as far as I know, from *Cathay*, or the Confucian Odes, as these, being themselves sort of translations, may discourage translators. We cannot read his most important short poem, - considered by some to be his greatest poem[1] - *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, in Hungarian. A few years ago a representatively selected translation of *The Cantos* was published in Paris[2] but of all the more than 110 cantos only 6 (six) have been translated and published in Hungary. These are Cantos 2, 8, 13, 45, 51, and 49. - we can find the famous "Pull down thy vanity" piece from Canto 81, too, in several versions. Apart from these, the Hungarian reading public is completely unaware of Pound's poetry after 1937.

In addition to this being a regrettable loss to us (which with the years passing increases, and what is more, makes more recent poetry in English more difficult to appreciate),

and a gap to be filled, studying Pound's life and connections can be enjoyable, too, and it is along this line that I propose to go on in the present paper.

I doubt that any writer in English with the obvious exception of Hemingway had a more exciting and interesting life, than Ezra Pound. Born in Idaho in 1885 (is the approaching centenary enough in his case to stir up some interest and will to publish?), he came to stay in Europe, first in London (1911-1921), where he soon established himself as one of the central figures in literary circles, advancing young writers (Eliot, Joyce, Frost et al.), influencing already well-known, mature poets, like Yeats, founding literary 'schools', like Imagism and Vorticism, making himself a name as the author of several books of poems, and so on. Then he moved to Paris, but refused to be one of "the lost generation", and in exchange for boxing lessons he taught Hemingway a few things beside fencing. When he found life stale in France, he moved on to Rapallo, Italy, and stayed there spending his time organizing concerts, re-discovering Vivaldi, composing his Villon opera[3] studying economics and monetary theory, writing thousands of letters, articles, and his long 'epic' poem, *The Cantos*, and speaking his mind very unwisely on Radio Rome even after the United States had declared war on Italy (see: Doob, 1978). Then came the D.T.C in Pisa (and *The Pisan Cantos!*), his indictment, and 13 years in St. Elizabeths. Everybody with a scant knowledge of him knows about the Bollingen-prize controversy in 1949, and

remembers Hemingway saying, when he received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1954 that the prize ought to have gone to Pound. When the United States let its "national skeleton"[4] go, he returned to Italy to live with his daughter, the Princess Mary Rachewiltz, and spent his final years in a self-imposed silence, which may not have had such unambiguous causes as several critics tend to suppose.

During his long and eventful life he made the acquaintance of many people, and among them there were a few Hungarians, too. Of these, it may be interesting to note, only one was a poet, Carl Rakosi from New York.

Pound's most enduring Hungarian connection proved to be *Tibor Serly*, a Hungarian-born musician.

He was born in Losonc, in 1900.[5] His father, Lajos Serly was also a musician, founder of the Kisfaludy Theatre in Óbuda, conductor, and the composer of many popular operettas and songs. In 1905 he emigrated to the United States with his family, but sent his son, Tibor back to Budapest to study at the Hungarian Academy of Music. One of the most important experiences in Tibor Serly's life was having had Zoltán Kodály as his teacher at the Academy. In the early twenties he went back to the States, playing the viola in Cincinnati, then in the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra, and later with the NBC Symphony Orchestra. After a few years he gave up performing and turned to conducting and composing, and moved to New York, where he also taught music. Some of his compositions were first performed in Budapest (Symphony

No. 1, and Six Dance Designs, both on May 13, 1935, with the composer conducting). In Hungary he is remembered mainly for his close friendship with Béla Bartók during the latter's last years in the United States. Bartók's last, posthumous composition, the Viola Concerto, was completed and orchestrated by Serly, and it was also he who reconstructed the last 17 bars from the composer's notes in Bartók's Piano Concerto No.3. Serly visited Hungary after World War II, attended the performances of his works, made recordings for the Hungarian Radio (his wife, Alice was an accomplished pianist). He was killed in a car accident in Great Britain just before he was due to visit Budapest again, in 1978.

During his 1976 visit, which turned out to be his last, I had a conversation with him, chiefly about Ezra Pound, and I am going to present excerpts from this interview which I recorded.[6]

When asked how he got acquainted with Pound, he said it happened through *William Carlos Williams*, who had also gone to school with him, and when he returned to New York from Hungary after the Academy years, Williams introduced him to several young American poets, of whom he named *Louis Zukofsky*, *Basil Bunting*, and *Reznikoff*. And

> "Zukofsky gave me a little book that he [Ezra Pound] wrote about George Antheil. The book revolted me very much, you see, I came from the Hungarian school

> and had some idea of Antheil, and I knew and understood very well who this man was, as he had already had his author's night in Budapest in 1923 or 1924. At that time he was said to keep a revolver beside the piano, so that he could defend himself if something happened. Well, he was one of the first avant-garde musicians in the early twenties, though it wasn't called avant-garde at that time. We saw immediately, with Kodály, who also heard him, that something was fishy here, this is a clever man, a clever musician, but the whole thing is a fake. (...), I said at once that this man would get to Hollywood in the end, and that's what happened in two or three years, he went to Hollywood, composed film-music, and died there, too."

The book mentioned was Pound's *Antheil and The Treatise on Harmony*, written in 1923, and published in the U.S.A. in Chicago by Pascal Covici in September, 1927. *George Antheil* (1900-1959), the American composer and pianist, the "bad boy of music", as he was universally known, and who described his experimental orchestrations (airplane engines, ten pianos, machines) in his autobiographical book, bearing the same title (Antheil, 1947), had arrived in Paris in June, 1923, and at a tea soon afterward met Pound. They became interested in each other's music; Antheil helped Pound to get his opera down on paper and Pound advertised Antheil in his book, and in several articles signed William Atheling. Their friendship lasted for years, with Pound going to Frankfurt, for example, for the first performance of Antheil's opera *Transatlantic* (*The Peoples Choice*), on Sunday, May 25, 1928 (Stock 1974, 366).

The Paris edition of the *New York Herald Tribune* of 10 April in the same year carried a story headed *"A Riot of Music"*, in which the following information was given "on the authority of Ezra Pound":

> "Two hundred and fifty Socialists were arrested after his last concert there ... The temperamental Hungarians expected the *Ballet Mécanique* and when given the milder side of Antheil began discussion with the classikers. The discussion continued through the night, ending in a row at the opening of Parliament. Two hundred and fifty arrests."
> (Stock 1974, 338)[7]

The "authority" of Pound stands in proper light if we remember that he never in his life visited Budapest. The gesture is characteristic, though.

Antheil was not very grateful for Pound's book, though he admitted that the *Treatise* gave him the publicity he needed. To complete the picture we may remember that when Pound was indicted for treason, Antheil supplied the FBI with copies of his out-of-print books and provided the names of other potential witnesses (Heymann 1976, 134). Heymann, however, may be exaggerating when he accuses several people of abandoning or betraying Pound, among others *Aldington, Virginia Rice, Zukofsky, Serly, John Drummond, e.e. cummings*. "Only T.S. Eliot and Hemingway remained mute. The rest seemed at best undecided, at worst willing and able to testify against Pound in an effort to further the government's cause." (Heymann 1976, 134-135)

So, enraged by Pound backing a fraud, Serly immediately wrote him a letter, criticizing his choice, and expressing his astonishment at the well-known literary figure having anything to do with Antheil. Pound answered Serly, a correspondence ensued, and they finally met in 1930. Though the meeting lacked the dramatic element of Pound's first encounter with Joyce, and had nothing of the anecdotal touch of that with Graves, still I quote it:

> "He [Pound] said they had come to Rapallo with his wife, was it July or August, I think it was end of August, and I shall never forget it, I arrived at Rapallo from Paris by train, it was a wonderful morning, rather early, before seven, it was almost like a dream, and I was young then, so I carried my luggage, though I had not slept all night, but the air was wonderful ... I arrived there early, but everything was arranged at the hotel. It was a beautiful room, it had been reserved, we have been expecting you, they said, everything is all right, Mr. Ezra Pound is coming at nine, he'll be here in the restaurant of the hotel ... I went out for a stroll, to have a look round in Rapallo. It was a tiny little place, you could see the whole town in ten minutes, and I remember that on the way back I saw this man with the red hair and red beard, as if I could feel from his eyes from a distance ..."

It was E.P. all right, and though Serly could not remember much of their first meeting, he recalled it was difficult to understand Pound, because

> "he could speak such a language and with such an intonation that you had to get accustomed to it first (...)

during the conversation he could change his way of speaking three or four times ..."

They had a lively chat about mutual friends, but Serly did not remember much more about it.

After this Serly went on and described his life in the U.S.A. as a musician educated in Hungary. He felt superior to his colleagues, not without good reason. Serly could not talk to anybody about music in the States, so he spent four months out of every year in Europe for some time, having a job that made this possible. He met the greatest in the literature of those days: Joyce, Ford Madox Ford, Yeats, Hauptmann, Eliot. For seven or eight years he met Pound every year, once in Sienna, once in Paris, mostly in Rapallo. He remembered these years as the greatest time of his life.

And this is how he helped Pound get in touch with contemporary Hungarian music:

"Well, my real life as a musician started there in 1931, 32, 33, 34. I took my instrument with me, we often played together with Olga Rudge, and then I had the opportunity to introduce composers. I didn't start, of course, with Serly, but Kodály and especially Bartók, and then the young artists, performers and composers from Hungary. Well, there was, first of all, *Géza Frid*, who is here with me now, and a sort of *round table*[8] was started. There was *Iván Engel* with his wife, the German sculptress and painter, *Ilse*, so I brought them together. Géza Frid, Iván Engel, first Iván Engel, the pianist and then the others came. There was the *Gertler Quartet*, and then the *Palotai-Székely Quartet*, and that was the first time we talked

about Bartók. He was well-informed, he had a very good sense for it ... Naturally, I wasn't there all the time, but we contacted the two quartets, that is the Gertler Quartet and the recently formed Palotai-Székely Quartet, which was the *New Hungarian Quartet* ... this quartet still exists, though the old members have retired ... So, it was then that Ezre Pound learnt about Bartók, Bartók's music. I don't know why, Kodály somehow remained in the background already then, as far as I can remember, there were no works by Kodály performed, though they may have played the Kodály quartet sometime. That's how the Hungarian music, the Hungarian connection started, chiefly Bartók. Ezra Pound somehow always knew instinctively what was really good and what wasn't. He made only one bad judgement, and that wasn't a big mistake either, and that was, as I've said, about Antheil."

It is a fact though, that Pound knew or heard about Zoltán Kodály and held him in high esteem. The following passage illustrates, apart from this, that already in 1933, he knew that Serly was a composer. Some light is also shed on the degree of Serly's not very flattering opinion about his fellow musicians.

"I said to a brilliant composer [footnote: Tibor Serly] and a pupil of Kodály:
These people can't make a melody, they can't make a melody four bars long.
He roared in reply: Four bars, they can't make one two bars long."

(Pound, *ABC*)[9]

Pound started organizing the Rapallo concerts in 1933. The two who formed the nucleus were Olga Rudge, the American violinist (and mother to Pound's daughter, Mary), and the German pianist, Gerhardt Münch. They began with the performances of all the Mozart sonatas for violin and piano. There was so much interest that Pound was granted the use of the Rapallo town hall for the concerts, which became known as "Concerti Tigulliani", after the bay of Tigullio, on which Rapallo is situated. The responsibility for raising the necessary funds fell on Pound which caused him quite a headache sometimes. From one of his letters to Serly (three of them can be found in the *Selected Letters*) it also turns out that he knew the Gertlers first, and heard the New Hungarian Quartet for the first time only in September, 1936.

> "Venice, (September, 1936)
> Dear TTT-borrrRRR: Yer damn right, them New Hungs *can* play the fourtett. I like Palotai vurry much. He can't say much and we have only my limping German. I wd. damn well like to have 'em in Rapallo. In fact am determined to go on with the Rapal. concerts, despite the fact that I have no assets save what I can earn. And haven't yet sold the stuff I propose to shove into 'em.
>
> Pal. sez they wd. be passing thru Italy in Feb. You spose they wd. come for 500 lire and a night's lodging? I can't *tell* 'em the Gertlers did and would again. I don't honestly know which 4tet is the better. Palotai a better cello than Gertler has, I think. Eh bo? Both of the quarts played here last week. Hung. in Ferroud and Bartok Vth. Gertler in Honegger and Berg. ..."

> "Yunnerstand I can't even *offer* the 500 lire yet. All I can do is to ask you to write Pal in Magyr and ask if they wd. be insulted by the suggestion. I told him I wd. like to have 'em. The date wd. be at their convenience. ..."
>
> "Onforchoonate incident. The Hungs wanted to *eat* at midnight. I have known Venice 30 years but never tried to eat a dinner at midnight. I know that all the good cheap restaurants, the family cookings, etc., close at about 9.55. Am afraid I got 'em stuck with some bad grub, but it was the only place I cd. count on being open. Not having any common langwidge, will you tender my tough apologies and hope they fergive and ferget. The violer player yenned toward another place, where I thought they wd. git stuck a price. Mebbe they wdn't have been stuck but it is a place on the Piazza where I thought it wuz dangerous for working men like ourselves to risk a bill. ..."
>
> (Paige, 258)

I do not know if Serly wrote them in "Magyr", but the "Hungs" "fergave" and "fergot", and were not insulted by the 500 lire, because they did play in 1936, on one of Pound's concerts, as we learn from another letter of Pound to Serly. (Paige, 243-244; April, 1940)

The next letter (Rapallo, October, 1939) informs us that though Pound may not have known Kodály's music, and may not have had it performed in Rapallo, on one occasion at least he had the privilege to be asked to translate the words of a Transylvanian folk song "Egy Nagyóru Bóha" (The Monstrous Flea) into English. The translation was to Serly's setting of the song - he did not know at that time (1939 - ?) that the same song had been treated by Kodály in his *Székelyfond*

in 1932.[10]

Serly (and perhaps, Pound, too) must have had the possibility of a performance in mind, as emphasis is laid on the understandability of the words in English, *when sung*. Just like almost forty years later, when Serly wanted to have Mary Barnard's ("the last of E.P.'s favorite disciples") *The Plaiades* translated for the Budapest performance of his *Cantata*, October, 1978[11] - the visit and the performance, unfortunately, could never be realized.

The part Serly asked Pound to translate is the following:

> Egy nagyóru bolha Ugy nálunk kapott vót,
> Ebéden, vacsorán Mindig csak nálunk vót.
> De annak a szeme Olyan szörnyü nagy vót:
> Mikor kinyitotta, A ház világos vót.
> De annak a körme Olyan szörnyü nagy vót,
> Hogy a ház ódalát Mind lekörmölte vót.
> De annak a hasa Olyan szörnyü nagy vót
> Duna vize Tisza vize Mind belérekedt vót.[12]

Before Pound's version, I give the English words of this song from the tri-lingual Universal Edition, of the *Székelyfonó* by Elisabeth M. Lockwood:

> Long Nose comes acalling, Daily comes acalling
> Comes to lunch, stays to dine, Isn't it apalling!
> Stands so fiercely staring, All around aglaring.
> That his eyes, burning wild, Set the house aflaring.
> Long and sharp his nails are, And his arms like flails are,
> Saw the air, scratch and tear, Smash the house to pieces.
> See him gorge and guzzle, With his victuals tussle,
> And his thirst is so outrageous, Rivers could not slake it![13]

Pound sent Serly the following translation, "a 'Flea' that the audience can understand when sung."

> By god-it was a /BUCK FLEA/ An' the damn thing/BIT us
> Dinner TIME/supper TIME,/he was always WITH us.
> Had he eyes this/BUCK FLEA?/Had eyes like a/HEAD-light.
> Did they GLARE?/Did they FLARE?/By god like a/FLOOD-light.
> Had he claws that/BUCK FLEA?/When he came to/BITE us
> He had CLAWS/to break-the WALLS/on-the inside and/OUTside.
> Had he belly?/BY GOD/had he lights and/LIVER?
> Had a GUT/that would HOLD/all the Danube RIVER.

Pound commented on his translation as follows:

> "I take it 'hagy' [sic!] is two syllables in the original, sung to one *a*. I have put two syllables to *a* in 'god-it', 'break-the'. For 'break-the' you could have 'break almost all the' and the 'the' a mere 'grace note'; and to sing 'on the in' as triplet; especially as both 'thes' are on the same note (*g*). At any rate, the thing can be *heard*, and the emphasis of the singer comes on words that take an emphasis of meaning. Also certain almost rhymes in original akin to the English 'bit', 'with'; 'light', 'out'; 'floodlight' and 'headlight' ..."
> "... 'Buck' keeps the 'B' of 'bo' and the accent. '*Ram* flea' might be easier to sing, but not so good for the rise from *a* to *o* in the first 'BOha' and the mouth closes on 'buCK'. At any rate this is as good as can be done in the time.
> The slight changes in duration value of words from one verse to another are characteristic of folk song and keep it from being monotonous. 'Ram flea' might get slurred and the meaning lost. You don't say it was '*he* flea' till the 3rd strophe, but I reckon the male of the species is understood and that a *boha* of this

> natr wuz a buck or, if you like, a *bull* flea. ..."
>
> "In the second and third stanzas 'buck' seems to me better than 'bull'. 'Buck' and 'bite', 'light', etc., make better zyzogy than a soft sound like *ll* of 'bull'. And so forth."
>
> (Paige, 326-327)

All the comments are related to the words being sung, the most important aspect for him being how it would *sound*, which is no surprise, of course, Pound having the reputation for the beat ears that an American poet has ever had.

A remark ("If you want to send me word for word translation of the original not taking any account of the music, I'll see if I can make any improvements.") however, leaves the impression that either he himself made the translation from the Hungarian, or used a mediatory version, most probably German, of the verse, and the latter seems more likely. (Though the language of the original could not have been a puzzle for long for a translator of Pound's ability and experience, - and the mis-translation of the only really difficult (dialectal) clause, "ugy nálunk kapott vót" into "An' the damn thing bit us" instead of something like "taking such a fancy to us" might be made an argument for crediting Pound with having translated from Hungarian besides Anglo-Saxon, Chinese, French, German, Italian, Latin, Greek, Provencal, etc.)

The comparison between the two English translations results in the palm going to Pound. He follows the "content" closer: he has "buck flea" instead of some "Long Nose"; and

he can squeeze at least one of the well-known rivers of Hungary into the last line. Pound's translation is closer to the Hungarian in that in both the flea's fabulous, wonderfully monstrous properties (eyes, nails, belly) are emphasized, and his actions are derivative, and they only illustrate (by his scratching the walls, containing rivers) his being a magic creature, while in Lockwood's version Long Nose is monstrous as a result of what he does, her text is full of verbs (4 verbs in the Hungarian, 7 in E.P. and 17! in Lockwood), and he is not fabulous, but simply horrible - not a giant from a tale, but a raging madman.

Pound's *form* is also more like that of the original. The four stanzas are clearly separated formally, too. The lines beginning with "de annak a..." turn into questions, "had he...?", and with this Pound retains much/most of this repetitive-accumulative effect very characteristic of certain folk-songs. Also, much of the mocking tone is saved by this device. His rhyming, though not following the Hungarian "vót-vót-vót...", is incomparably more consistent than, and superior to, Lockwood's.

From the third letter addressed to Serly in Pound's *Selected Letters* (April, 1940) we can get an idea of the Rapallo concerts. Serly must have been asking about the programmes of the series from the beginning, and Pound gives him a "main outline", with Mozart, Scriabine, William Young, Teleman, and:

> "7. 1935 (I think). Serly, etc. That must have been Gertler IV. Bartok, third quartet."

Then Vivaldi, and:

> "9. New Hungarian 4tet.
> 10. Bartok 2 and 5. Also Ferroud, Boccherini.
> 11. Prog. Bartok, Haydn, Bartok (vide prog. eleven)"
> (Paige, 243-244)

Pound could not remember every item in the series, since no consistent records have been kept. This is less astonishing in view of the fact that in 1981 it seems to be impossible to obtain the programmes of Tibor Serly's 1972 and 1976 concerts in Hungary, at the Academy of Music.

As Charles Norman, Pound's first comprehensive biographer informs us, Louis Zukofsky, the mutual friend of Pound and Serly also caused a minor encounter of Pound with things Hungarian.

> "June 1933. From Paris he (Zukofsky) went to Budapest to join Tibor Serly. A reporter from *Pesti Napló* interviewed him in a coffeehouse on the Danube waterfront. The photograph that appears with the interview shows a long, narrow earnest face, brown eyes peering intently from behind horn-rimmed glasses, thick dark brown hair parted on the left side. He was twenty-eight years old. The interviewer noted that he spoke "in a quiet almost whispering tone". Basil Bunting, in a red jacket, met him in Genoa to escort him to Rapallo"(Norman 1960, 318)

where he was to meet Pound for the first time.

"... in August Serly arrived from Budapest, bringing the interview." (Norman 1960, 318)

Norman then goes on telling us that "Pound was intrigued", and he wrote down and typed the interview, which Serly was translating to him and to the listening Zukofsky. He also prints the most important parts from Pound's typescript.

The interview, which appeared in *Pesti Napló* (August 13, 1933, Sunday, p 37) is of some interest, and I am going to translate it here, with a few comments afterwards. The italicized sections are those published by Norman from Pound's script, in his or Serly's translation.

"*Louis Zukofsky: American Vanguard Poet*
by Árpád Pásztor

Here he is, sitting opposite to me in a *coffeehouse on the Danube waterfront.* He is a modern American poet. One of the most modern. He speaks *in a quiet almost whispering tone,* but remarkably correctly, with an unquenchable inner fire.

I needn't even ask him how he came to be born in America. His whole appearance, his eyes burning behind his glasses, his black hair, Creole complexion, the music in his voice tells immediately that his father was an immigrant Jew from Russia.

He may have been a tailor or a furrier, but by all means a petty craftsman, who left the Tsar's Russia for the land of the Yankees to try his fortune there. That's how Morris Rosenfeld emigrated to New York with his family, and Louis Zukofsky comes from the same background.

But what a difference there is between Morris

Rosenfeld and Louis Zukofsky! Morris Rosenfeld is Yiddish, Louis Zukofsky is Anglo-American, in full possession of the treasures of Emerson's, Bryan's, and Whitman's classic American, and Shakespeare's even more classic English language. Morris Rosenfeld is a Socialist agitator, the poet of the oppressed people of the sweat-shops, whereas Zukofsky has already grown out of Socialism and class struggle - he is an aesthete and a cultural philosopher.

Morris Rosenfeld took Russia (the Tsar's Russia) with him to America, Zukofsky attended American schools and university, his education is throughly American, but he atavistically yearns and longs for European civilization.

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Much as he denies it that's just why and how he has come to Europe, for the first time in his life.

"*How do you like Europe?*" I ask the young man, who is 28. "*Don't misunderstand me, I don't mean as a tourist but as a poet.*"

"*To speak candidly,*" he says, "*Europe does not interest me very much. In America we have grown out of this interest in Europe. We take and have taken only the best that Europe possessed. I came here chiefly to meet the master of American poetry and in a sense its father, Ezra Pound, who has now been living for several years in Rapallo.*"

"*Is there a definite group in America who acknowledge Pound and have definite characteristics?*"

"*Yes and no. They have broken with the known, customary, successful, banal forms. Each of the group tries in his own way to find means of expression and this very independence holds the group together.*"

"Could you mention a few names?"

"Certainly. *Among the most important are William*

Carlos Williams, René Taupin, Basil Bunting and Carl Rakosi, who will probably interest you seeing he is a Hungarian. I might also mention Charles Reznikoff, Kenneth Rexroth and Forrest Anderson."

"Much as we regret it, we have not yet had the opportunity of making the acquaintance of any of them."

"I can relieve you of some of the regret by saying that few in America know of them."

"How do these poets and writers live?"

"Most of them live in poverty and miserable conditions, their work having no commercial value, and the publishers neglecting them."

"Still, how do they make themselves heard? How do they publish their works?"

"One of them has recently come into an inheritance of a few hundred dollars, and he has made an anthology of his friends' prose and poetry. Its title was *An Objectivists Anthologye* [sic!] and it has attracted considerable attention. Bookshops in London and Paris sell Ezra Pound's *"How to Read", a fundamental work, in which he states that this and that in particular is fit and meet to be read, and a foundation for modern poetry.* If I may call anything concerning us dogmatic, then this book of Ezra Pound IS dogmatic. *Beside this, the volume Cantos has been published* by Pound. *This is the representative masterwork of modern poetry."*

"What do you mean by 'modern'?"

"I am aware that 'modern' is a word much used and abused. *Modern to me is Dante with whom, at bottom, modern poetry began since it was he who freed poetry from static clichés and created a simultaneous historical poetry;* Shakespeare is modern in many respects, though much of his work is garrulous and

verbose, but he has places of indestructible beauty and everlasting value; Whitman is modern, too, but uneducated and uncivilized at the same time. Our aim is to pick the essence of every age, and transcending it, to speak the voice of today. We don't reject rhymed forms, nor metric poetry - we strive to fill classic forms with modern meaning, and to express our emotions and passions by presenting the mosaics of everyday life. All I've said, however, applies only to me and not to the other names mentioned."

"But then what are your common characteristics?"

"It is perhaps that *we tend to write an expressive and musical verse rather than a magniloquent one. We seek the plasticity of words and their interrelations and musical connections rather than their denotations. We look for actual beauty (value) and not for atmosphere. We do not accept this business of atmosphere."*

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"And you, Mr. Zukofsky, how and where do you live?"

"I write and sometimes my works are published. I get a couple of dollars for them, so I get along. I am a teacher, I used to lecture on English at the University of Wisconsin, but teaching tires and doesn't satisfy me, so I've given it up. I live in Brooklyn, needless to say, under very modest conditions."

"I would like to publish here one of your poems, which could convey to the English-speaking public that which I couldn't ask or haven't been able to express."

"You are welcome, here you are."

And this is the poem he gave me:

Song 19

Checkers, checkmate and checkboard,
Confused are checkerboard and chess;
Shall whose writing be on paper
Whose move is on the checkboard?

If read of a set have each a wreath
Each black checker should be wreathed:
Noble typing will make the writing
Her breath is his, to type "checkmate bequeathed"[14]

I don't attempt to translate this *love* poem, not even in prose. Those who understand English may admire or reject its beauty or un-poeticalness, its play on form, the architecutre of its words, and ... excuse me, Mr. Zukofsky - its atmosphere.

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So this is how a small group lives and struggles over there, in "heartless" America, interested only in artistic forms and the music of words, while all around them a struggle of life and death is fought by that which they had, have had and will have nothing to do with: the dollar. "

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The notes Pound jotted down might have been meant to serve merely his curiosity, but it is also possible that he planned to use them on some appropriate occasion for propaganda, for publicity purposes. This latter intention might be traced in the wording "the master of American poetry and in a sense his father" - the Hungarian version simply says:

"the master (teacher) and father of American poetry" ("az amerikai modern költészet tanitómesterével és apjával"). *The Cantos* are meantioned in Hungarian as "masterpieces of modern poetry" ("mestermüvei a modern költészetnek"), while Pound preferred "the *representative* masterwork of modern poetry".

The same subtler wording or appreciation can be seen in connection with "How to Read", "Ezra Pound's fundamental work, in which he laid down the principles of modern poetry" ("alapvetõ müve, amelyben a modern költészet irányelveit rögzitette le"). In his notes Pound must have made Serly's translation (which we do not have) more precise, without using the word "principles" and saying what the book *really* is - "in which he states that this and that in particular is fit and meet to be read" - and also agreeing to its being a "foundation for modern poetry".

One more comment on this section in Charles Norman's book. He says on p. 319: "His interviewer remarked: 'If anything of ours were to be spoken of in this manner, we would say it was dogmatic.'" This is an outright mistake, as it is clear from the interview above, that Zukofsky himself said that. It would be impossible to find out now who made the mistake, Serly, Pound, or Norman - the only thing worth doing seems just to set it right. The matter may not be of major importance but still, the sentence, from the right person, can illuminate one of the characteristics of the relationship between Pound and *les jeunes* in New York.

Pound and Serly met for the last time in New York in 1939, during the poet's last visit to the States before World War II. This visit is well-known, so are the incidents concerning Serly. (He was, by the way, the source of many a legendary anecdote about Bartók and Kodály, too.) In the 1976 interview Serly mentioned Pound visiting him unexpectedly in his apartment near the Museum of Modern Arts, with a host of his (Pound's) friends, also the notorious incident of Pound not having a pair of black shoes in which to receive his honorary doctorate from Hamilton College, and Serly helping him with a pair (or having one brown pair painted black?), and the heated discussion they had about Mussolini and Fascism.

As to antisemitism, Serly denied that Pound had anything to do with it, but his arguments (Pound having very good Jewish friends, Zukofsky visiting him with his son even in St. Elizabeths, etc.) are old ammunition, which had long before been fired pro and con in the passionate debates over the Pound case in the forties and fifties (see e.g. O'Connor-Stone 1959).

To me the most interesting part of the conversation with Serly was the strange incident in connection with the poet's death. They did not meet after 1939, but the Serlys made friends with the Rachewiltzes, visited them in Brunnenburg castle near Merano (the small town in Tyrol had an additional attraction for Serly, Bartók having been cured of his tuberculosis there in his childhood) in 1970. Olga Rudge did

not answer their letters after the war.

In 1972, when the Serlys were touring Hungary, giving concerts and making recordings for Hungarian Radio, Serly decided it was time they visited Pound in Venice.

> "He was 86, I heard his health was good, and then I wrote him a letter from here, Budapest, telling him I would like to go to see him in Venice, I don't mind if he doesn't speak. We knew he didn't, we had had word with people who had visited him. And marvel of marvels, we got a telegram at once, saying 'be glad to see you before november one'. BE GLAD TO SEE YOU BEFORE NOVEMBER ONE.[15] So we booked a room by wire and arrived in Venice on 28 October. And there was a letter for me from Olga Rudge, in which she said Pound was having his birthday on 31 October, and there were some problems with the young people coming to see and celebrate Pound, trying to take him for a short boat trip, so she asked me *not* to call before 1 November."

Serly had to leave Venice on 2 November, so on the 1st he called Olga Rudge.

> "I rang her in the morning, and it was a wonder, because if I had rung two minutes later, she wouldn't have been there, and I would have learnt about it from the morning papers ... and her voice was so strange in the phone, and she said it wasn't possible any more, and I knew from her voice that something was wrong, and I said ... 'Do you want to tell me...?'"

The telegram has made Serly think Pound must have had some premonition of his death - which is easy to understand.

One of the most detailed accounts of Pound's last days, Heymann's *The Last Rower*, drawing heavily on Davenport's *Esra Pound: 1885-1972*,[16] does not mention the visit of Serly, nor that, according to Serly, the Pounds were expecting to hear Alice Serly play, and had borrowed a piano for the occasion. Nor is the boat trip mentioned in the account mentioned:

> "His last birthday party was full of joy: cake, champagne, neighboring children, friends. His conversation that day touched briefly Jules Laforgue, Henri Michaux and Marianne Moore."
>
> (Heymann 1976, 314)

The Serlys could not stay in Venice for the funeral, but they went to see Pound's body in Saint John and Paul Hospital, and also attended a service with Olga Rudge, Mary and Patrizia Rachewiltz the following morning. They were not present at the funeral, on November 3:

I think it is fitting to close the memories of Pound's Hungarian friend with his words on the poet:

> "The most important thing in an artist - and in this respect Pound was superior to the musicians I knew, even Bartók, Kodály, Stravinsky and Schönberg - is to search for talent. They, Pound and his friends, didn't advertise their own, yes, they worked, but the most important for them was to see whom they could find, who was talented, and what they could do for them. Well, this is impossible in the world of musicians, maybe in any world today. And the head of those, who did so, and their soul, was Pound - and that's how he lived all his life."

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This has been an attempt to dig up and group a few pieces of data concerning Ezra Pound and Tibor Serly. Most of it is already printed material, but it is exciting for us Hungarians to try to guess - and therefore, quite reasonable on our part to try to find out - what lies half-buried in the Pound archives in Italy and the United States that might be interesting, illuminating, even relevant to things (poetry, music, criticism) Hungarian.

N O T E S

1 See, for example, the best known: F.R. Leavis: "Ezra Pound" in Sutton 1963, 26-40.

2 Ezra Pound: *Cantók* - Válogatta, forditotta, az utószót irta Kemenes Géfin László. Magyar Mühely, Páriss 1975.

3 A recent edition: Ezra Pound: *Le Testament de Villon* (ASKO-ensemble, ASKO-koor, dirigent: Reinbert de Leeuw, Holland Festival 1980) Teksten op insteekkaart, PHILIPS Stereo 9500 927.

4 "Pound's room at St. Elizabeths has been called 'a closet which contains a national skeleton'." Editorial in *Life*. February 6, 1956.

5 *Uj Magyar Lexikon* says 1902, but *Zenei Lexikon* and *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians* are more reliable.

6 The interview took place in Hungarian, in Budapest, November 14, 1976. The recording is unfortunately of very poor quality. The quotations from it are my translation from the transcript I have made from the cassette. The recording is approximately 50 minutes long, the transcript MS is 15 pages.

7 The incident cannot be traced in contemporary Budapest newspapers.

8 English in the original.

9 Further proof of Pound's sympathy for and feeling at one with Serly is the passage from Canto 35:

> Mr Fidascz
> explained to me

the horrors of playing the fiddle while that ass
Nataanovitch
or some better known -ovitch
whose name we must respect because of the
law of libel
was conducting
in particular the Mattias Passion, after requesting
that
the audience come in black clothes;

Fidascz is Tibor Serly, Nataanovitch is Leopold Stokowski (Terrel 1980, 139-140)

10 Letter to me, April 4, 1976

11 Letter to me, February 18, 1978

12 Kodály, Zoltán: *Székelyfonó / Spinnery / Spinnstube*, Universal Edition, UE 10033, Zongorakivonat a szerzőtől; pp. 75-77.

13 English version copyright 1937 (Universal Edition)

14 in English in the Hungarian article

15 in English in the interview

16 *ARION* (*New Series*) I. 1973; pp. 188-196.

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