



Photo: From the collection of Péter Gágyor

Paths / Conversation with Péter Gágyor

“We don’t always choose our paths, sometimes our paths choose us. In the best-case scenario, we walk down the path of our fate on straight, smooth roads, but there are bumpy, up-hill, steep roads as well. At times, the wind blows sand in our eyes, other times the soles of our shoes get worn away into tatters and rags as we’re walking. Sometimes we cross boundaries willingly or unwillingly, by choice or out of necessity. We wander searching for our own voice and we only come to realize in hindsight when we were at the right place at the right time, or on the contrary, at the wrong place at the wrong time. Péter Gágyor has walked down on many roads, and he even turned around at times, but he walked along the most important path, the path of his own fate, in full.”

Péter Gágyor, *theater director, playwright, drama translator, publicist*

You were born in the Upland in 1946. Let’s talk a bit about the years you’ve spent there.

Ipolyság was a Hungarian city at the time. It was a bit gentry-like, it was a place fit for discourse, I remember how I received oral history: we were sitting outside and the elderly came by, everybody brought what they had, strudels, savory scones and we were eating and talking. They talked about the war, being prisoners of war, Ella, a kind old lady talked about the concentration camp with her tattooed hand, Laci, the elderly gentleman, spoke about being held captive by the Russians. Then, as communism had started becoming stronger things changed, conversing became dangerous. But I was lucky enough to live

through the time when it operated with relative freedom. So, after my teenage years, I started searching for a kind of ethical order in the socialism of the time with these foundations, for example by referring to the nationality laws of Lenin. However, at this point border patrol had already shot a few fishermen into the Ipoly who crossed to get the hooks that got caught at the other bank.

Did you marry young?

I was about twenty, and the Russians came not much later. We worked on underground newspapers and then we realized that there was no point in doing it. Since you were a minority, you could have no place in the Czech or Slovakian national desires. You're in a kind of marginalized state. And what did I have to do with entire Czechoslovakian process anyway? In the bottom of my heart I never accepted Czechoslovakia. I was from Ipolytő. Then I got transferred to Bratislava to Új Szó,¹⁸ I strove to cooperate and publish in those nationality-related, delicate topics that they needed at the moment. Eventually I ended up in Kosice and I was perhaps the only journalist who made a stand for the establishment of the Thalia Theater. Then came the cleanup campaign, first they got rid of the deviant party members, I wasn't one of them so my turn came at the end, but it came and I wasn't able to find employment. There wasn't a separate workbook, and entry and exit stamp was in the ID card and whenever they saw the exit stamp of the central party press publisher, they didn't even hire me as a vanguard for a truck. Then, since they had gotten rid of so many journalists, they had to replenish from underneath, they started hiring them from smaller papers, out of necessity with such conditions that I wasn't even allowed to write my initials at the bottom of an article. A factory newspaper hired me but all the materials had to be presented to the party president of the factory before publishing, who was half-illiterate so I could have written whatever I had wanted. But I had three children by then so I didn't want to lose this not so great salary. Meanwhile, I started working on the Nice Word Youth Theater. That was the moment when I was at the right time at the right place, we kept winning domestic and international festivals one after the other and our group was becoming increasingly prestigious.

Then you started directing.

Yes, Ildikó, my wife took over the Nice Word and when the Theater of Komárom extended an invitation to me, I gladly accepted. I wanted to redeem the Hungarian theater style at all costs with a new, different style. My first work as a director was Don Quixote in the Thalia Theater.

That's what resulted in a huge scandal, right?

Yes, that was the first performance in the Upland that ended up on the front page of Theater, a paper in Hungary, but the premier was reported to the police multiple times.

What was the matter?

It was deemed anti-Soviet.

¹⁸ In English the title means 'New Word' – Hungarian language only daily newspaper published in Bratislava, Slovakia.

The mill or the Sancho Panza?

Well, my Don Quixote took place at the restricted section of the psychiatric ward, and at the time delivering a speech about the Andalusian region that's simply radiating freedom may have seemed like a provocation, since in the Soviet Union they no longer took the resisting intellectuals to the Gulag, but to the psychiatric ward.

Refined version?

Yes. For that matter, I did not have any ill intentions, I've always been interested in ethical, not political questions, but regardless, they interpreted it as they did. I was allowed to stay, but my name couldn't appear on the poster.

How did the two-year statelessness happen?

The Slovakian Ministry of Culture notified me that they found it undesirable that unacceptable individuals, such as myself, represented the Czechoslovakian socialist culture abroad. So, I asked Győr, after multiple occasions of directing as a guest, what they could offer, and they told me that they would hire me full-time. I asked that my family could be there with me, we received a service apartment, but when crossing the border our IDs were taken away and they made all of us sign a document stating that we had been erased from the book of citizens of the Czechoslovakian Socialist Republic, the whole family. I don't know why my children had to do it as well, not sure what they did against socialism, two of them were still minors.

Did the notion of collective culpability prevail?

Yes. In Hungary, the law was that I had to show up at the National Central Authority for the Monitoring of Foreigners every six weeks, among Albanian bums and the like...

Sort of like in the venereal disease treatment center?

Yes, actually it really was similar. Prior to all this, for seven years they've tried persuading me to join the Czechoslovakian snitches. I fended off the attempts by claiming that "I was a babble mouth, I talk in my sleep at night, and when I get drunk I talk even more, you need to understand, I would cause you harm. But if I hear something, I will tell you anyway, because I love socialism more than anything." So, I had to make a fool of myself in order to be left alone.

Then in Hungary you got out of the frying pan into the fire.

Yes, regrettably I've never been able to keep my mouth shut; I think I'm someone who easily causes harm for himself. When we received the text of the oath of allegiance and it included swearing an oath on the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, I indicated that I did not want to be member of the party, citizenship was enough for me.

Oh, and it wasn't a 'la cart, was it?

Well, no. Moreover, the person who was taking care of my things at the police knocked on my door once saying that this time he would need my help and he gave me a few names from the Upland. I told him "no, you're knocking on the wrong door, I didn't do it there,

I'm not doing it here." He was very nice about it actually; he didn't bother me with this afterwards. However, when we wanted to go to Austria for a weekend to visit my godson, armed men surrounded our car upon arriving to the border despite the fact that we all had visas. They made us get out of the car and took us to a room where there were only welded iron benches.

With teenage kids.

What's more, teenage girls! And when they had to go to the bathroom a young male soldier escorted them who turned his back, but they were not allowed to close the door on themselves. That's how they had humiliated us until the morning came when they sent us back to Győr. There they interrogated my wife and me separately, but thankfully, they left the children out of it. Where and why do we want to emigrate? That's when the word *to emigrate* was first spoken. Later the theater started taking sanctions against me as well because I refused to cooperate with the III/III.¹⁹ After dragging each other's feet for a little while they told me that they weren't able to hire me for the next year and that I had to return the keys of the service apartment. My three children were already studying in Pest during this time.

In your novel 'These' you write about the inner struggles you've gone through in the weeks prior to emigration. Can you recall the specific moment when the final decision was made?

I tried to get in touch with a few theaters outside of Budapest, in the country, but when I went there I was greeted by closed doors. The III/III department operated nation-wide. There was simply no place to stay. I'm a passionate man, the way it went down inside of me was that I dreamed that I threw my past, my knowledge, my culture, and my education I've had up until that point into an automated machine. And then that would give me a list of options I can choose from as to what I wanted to become, Lapp, Finnish, Norwegian or Italian. That we ended up coming back to this country is primarily due to my wife.

20 years later.

That's correct. My wife is three quarters German and when we left the country we got our passports and IDs within a week, not like in Hungary where the same thing took two years of waiting. But Ildikó, despite her origin, is a more Hungarian Hungarian than I am, and the Germans in Bratislava used to be good Hungarians and they still are today. They cried when they were forced to leave the country and they sang the Hungarian national anthem. But we, well we had thick skin... Diósd used to be a beautiful Swabian village at the time; we lived here for a while. By the way, are you afraid that I might burn the tablecloth, that's why you didn't put one on?

That's exactly why.

That hurt...

¹⁹ Section of the state security services during the Communist-Socialist era from 1962, they were part of the political police and were responsible for matters concerning internal defense. They were monitoring all kinds of internal activity that was or was thought to be directed against the system and they also did everything to eliminate them.

Well, if that's the only thing that hurt then we don't have such a big problem. But let's get back to those 20 years because that's a terribly long time.

We were lucky because in a few years time we were able to visit home.

You left in 1986.

Yes. And when we crossed the border my wife turned off the windshield wipers because my vision was blurred although the window was dry. The girls were singing in the back-seat, a Hungarian folk song *"they're cutting the forest roads, they're taking the Hungarian boys, taking, taking the poor, poor Hungarian boys."* You know? And you have to drive, take your three daughters straight into the big nothing. But we couldn't stay here either, we had no place to live, no money, no jobs, nothing. If we had known that change had been coming, we would have waited it out even standing on one foot, God couldn't have moved us. But over there you realized – to use Márai's²⁰ words – that everybody sinks to their own level in emigration.

It's a good sentence.

Looking at it from socialism here, we thought that the process of negative selection that happened here did not happen in capitalism. But it does. It is for profit, while in socialism it happens along the lines of interests of those in power.

What did those 20 years give you? What kind of package did you bring home, from a negative and a positive aspect? Do you still go back?

Of course, one of my daughters lives there. But I'll never have anything to do with that society. There have been very exciting, fun, shallow experiences, and public administration offices, for example, exist in order to serve you.

Are they professionals?

Yes, shockingly so. The Austrian system doesn't work like theirs, although it's the same society. You go to any public administration office and to start off, the desk clerk doesn't just recognize his watch, he actually knows everything. He asks you what you want to get done; he takes down your name, gives you an envelope and tells you to come back at 3 pm. So, it's a functional system, every part of it is there to make the whole thing function, not because of some bureaucratic abstraction. It's particularly true for North Germany, we were in Gottingen. Although, it is less true for Bavarians, for example. Gottingen was a very good intellectual city, what bothered me about it was its radically green and leftist bias, which is still present. And they were biased blindly. And that's what I dread regarding modern-day liberalism. It is an eternal and constant threat for human kind when a utopia is turned into an ideology, then it turns into chaos and dictatorship. We've experienced it via communism. The ideas of utopian socialists were pretty much like a bedtime story, a fairy tale. Everybody will be the same and we're all going to smile. Then they executed a couple of tens of millions of people.

20 Sándor Márai (1900-1989) was an internationally known Hungarian writer and journalist who also lived in emigration for a long time.

Let's get back to the package. Professionalism was the good part, what was bad?

That it remained foreign.

Were you not able to integrate?

No, I wasn't. I came home, went to the József Katona Theater and they greeted me, "Mr. Director, are you home? How are you, how are things?" Whereas there, when they noticed the "y" in my name they immediately asked "Sind Sie Türke?"²¹ It would be worth doing an independent research study to illustrate how much the Germans like and don't like foreigners.

Could it be that they just have a different approach?

Germans don't like aliens. They pretend to do so, as if they really regretted World War II, but it is not true. Not to mention that there is an *obersturmführer* grandpa nearly everywhere and the family is quite proud of them.

If it's true, then Europe is indeed sitting on top of a barrel of gunpowder.

That's right. Of course, but just not yet, because the Germans' fertility rate is catastrophic. Lethargy appears in the hen yard when the numbers start decreasing, and the same thing is happening in Germany as they're unable to reproduce even at the minimal level. Today, the meaningful population increase is provided by the three-four children who are born in Turkish families. You barely see kids with blond hair and blue eyes. So, the Turkish help is included in the 1.4 fertility rate.

What could be the real rate?

I don't know, but I fear that it might be frightening, around 0.8.

We know that in Saxony it is definitely below 1.

Of course, because there are barely any Turkish people there.

And finally, you came home...

At first, I came home alone, I attended the University of Theater in Munich for a year, but I was unlucky because the borders of the GDR²² opened up just as I finished my auditor studies. I kept writing applications but the directors from the GDR whose mother tongue was German were doing the same. So, I was at a disadvantage on multiple levels. I didn't speak German until I was 42 years old, that's when I started learning the language at the Goethe Institute. This also shows that emigration was not something I planned to do. There was a press monitoring archive that operated along with the Free Europe radio. Since I was able to read the most important publications in Czech, Slovakian and Hungarian they hired me temporarily and I had to put together a daily and a weekly paper containing the most interesting topics. Various media sociologists then reviewed these; it was due to this, for example, that we were able to sense Mečiar's impending seizing of power months ahead. It was an interesting job actually, but it also ended, and the spectrum

²¹ German, it means „Are you Turkish?“

²² Abbreviation for German Democratic Republic.

of opportunities became narrow. We attempted to partake in commercial activities, but the artist-kind is better off staying out of trading, however, it has given me the chance to travel home and the Upland a lot.

What was the final reason for the decision?

I received an invitation from the Theater of Komárom and I was given the opportunity to direct two of my own plays. I had hopes of being able to continue where I had left off earlier. But I wasn't, despite being honored by the public's affection... the productions were successful anyway, although they were taken out of the program after a fairly short period. Then the actors suggested that we create a privately owned theater so we did, and we managed to keep it alive for 10 years with the help of random donations. But it couldn't break out of its charm, so after 10 years I told the last loyal members who had been earning pennies that we couldn't do this any longer, I couldn't handle it anymore, it was over. They grew angry; they were hurt because they would have continued despite the difficulties. But that would have meant the exploitation of the emotional ties.

You've mentioned earlier that you were never able to channel in anywhere. What do you think may be the reason for that?

Yes, I believe that I have serious flaws as well; I'm the adventurer type. During my late-teens I was a real cocky skunk, I wrote my first poem when I was 17 and I thought I was a genius, even today I face the same temptation. But when you find no more strength in yourself, it is something you can reach back to. You wonder, are you able to leave a message behind that will last a generation or two? Are you able to create a legacy in the form of an ethos that is cleaner than ordinary ethics?

Since you've brought up ethics, do you think that people's place of birth is primarily a matter of geography?

It is a sensitive topic for us from the Upland. "If you were born here, why aren't you Slovakian?" they ask. I usually ask back in this case, if I was born on an airplane, am I a bird? Or a dolphin if I was born aboard a ship? Deportation started just when I was born. My grandmother lived in Körmöcbánya; she came to get me and took me back there. At home, the family spoke in Hungarian, but the language of the street was Slovakian. So, when the Hungarian schools opened following 1948 and I went there they laughed at me for using Indo-European conjugation patterns. For example, the plural form of nouns is differently formed in the Slavic and German languages. So, I was under continuous pressure to prove why and how I was Hungarian even as a child, although theoretically it is not a problem that should be dealt with in that period.

Although the cultural area is identical, isn't it? Now, however, an alien culture is flooding into Europe permanently in large numbers and the occurrence of terror attacks has been increasing in the past few years. Many still claim that radical Islamists carry these out. Do you think that it would be a valid question to ask that if that is so, why is it that the peaceful muslims who live in Europe don't protest after every single attack, why don't they dissociate themselves? Or why was Salah Abdeslam able to hide in Molenbeek for

4 months, or if we go all the way back to the WTC catastrophe, why did the so-called peaceful muslims celebrate on the rooftops?

We were in small town of a few thousand people next to London 25 years ago; I think we could have been the 17th white person there. My wife, who is a very sensitive, humane individual got quite mad at me when I told her that either there will be a new *Reconquista*, or Europe is over. And if the *Reconquista* were to be repeated that would cause centuries worth of set back in civilizational communication. It would be enormously harmful. I'm still somewhat embarrassed to say is that it is a disgusting, heretic nightmare. And I am terribly sorry for my descendants that they might have to live in such an era, or what would be even worse, an Islamic era. The existence of peaceful Islam is a dreamy theory. And I would make those who don't understand this read the Eclipse of the Crescent Moon²³ at least in the form of a cartoon.

Oriana Fallaci thinks that the concept of Eurabia has already come to life in the head of the European leadership at the beginning of the '70s when the oil crisis began. Have you read the trilogy?

Yes, I've read parts of it. One the one hand, from Islam's point of view, it didn't just come to life now, rather the idea has never disappeared, it's a process that they refuse to give up as Islam is a form of religion that is unable to surrender. On the other hand, the greatest flaw of the entire capitalist, European ideology is that it's only interested in short-term profits. If a millionaire has seventeen yachts and he has only actually seen three of them and he is 76 years old... What does he need them for?

I don't know, but neither do I know why he is so sure that his children, grandchildren (assuming he has any) will also stand above the world as invulnerably as he is? They will also need some type of space to live in.

There is a certain level of selfishness where I'm selfish even to the disadvantage of my own children. Because children will not turn out to be like you've imagined them, like you've wanted them to be. They will be deceitful and lie to you.

So right in this moment it's only the ego?

Yes. It is the foundation of the entire consumer society; it is this life style, the life philosophy. They don't have an instinctive control gear within themselves, they are unable to control themselves, they keep wanting more and more like a hoarding hamster, there is no limit. Why is it good to destroy the Indonesian banking system, or to force the English Central Bank down on its knees by speculating with the pound and make 1 billion dollars of it? It's a permanent problem of our civilization that we tend to sit on the horse backwards. The basic principle of enlightenment – separating the state from the haughty religious force that wanted to have a say in everything – was commendable, but at the same time they managed to abolish the morale that, within the group of various heterogeneous abilities, remained without any guidelines and has gradually dwindled into its current form. By now, the expression “morale” has become nearly impossible to interpret.

23 A historic novel by Géza Gárdonyi (1863-1922). It takes place during the 1552 siege of Eger, during which the outnumbered Hungarian groups held off the Turkish invaders for over a month.

For example, take the issue of pension. Today, four engineers monitor a vehicle production line; while in the past 200 people were standing next to it. But now these four people pay the superannuation tax while the profit has multiplied enormously. I've never seen a social minister who wouldn't have complained about decreasing the superannuation fund, but it never occurs to them that the basic thought is fundamentally incorrect, as the superannuation fund should not be set based on the number of people involved, but based on the performance, that is, on the profit. The suffragette movement is an even stronger example. Instead of finding the correct placement of the female principle within society and constructing its material and moral background, the movement ended up giving male rights and male duties to women while keeping their old rights and duties as well. And what is the outcome?

Rákosi made the girls sit on tractors.

Yes, and they made them stand behind the wagons in the mines. The direct consequence of all this is that our civilization is unable to reproduce itself. That is when the Islam "helpers" are necessary. It presents itself exponentially in human society because things operate a lot more significantly in our subconscious than they do in a hen yard. Philosophies are built upon this, like that of Sartre, the post-Marxists or the representatives of the Frankfurt school – nihilism is starting to become a form of intellectual decoration. All our lives will finish with death and in the known scientific system we can't come up with anything that would satisfy the standard of proof so that it could provide us with steady consolation after our death.

Could education be the point of outbreak?

By all means. But teachers have been the worst paid intellectuals for a really long time and they still don't belong to the best-paid group. Not to mention that the younger they are when they start working with children, the lower their salaries are. Back in the day, they didn't even need a high school diploma to work in a nursery, and those who obtain a kindergarten teacher degree are not the most well prepared in the area of psychology either, not even today. Even though if we turned this around, they would be able to educate the most intelligent youth within a generation. Children represent the greatest value because *they* are the next generation, not money, not materials out of which nothing will be left in 50 years. The real value is the impact that we have on the next generation.

Lately, media is continuously blasting about corruption. Let's talk about it a bit. Do you think corruption can be party or nation-specific? Can it be related to the borders of a country or even a continent?

Absolutely not. Corruption is *human-specific*. Its value and effect depend on its magnitude. For example, the fact that we are in your house and I pat your German shepherds I'm immediately more likable than another guest who wouldn't even look at them. I somewhat corrupt you by this act, due to which you might make me a cup of coffee more kindly and willingly. So, corruption is present even in the smallest gestures. The emphasis here is really on the degree of corruption, controlling it is rather the job of the tax authorities, various other administrative offices, and the courts than that of the government. If

possible, these organizations should not be corrupt, so they can successfully persecute corruption.

But if we take the stance that it's okay to be a little corrupt, but not too much, it raises further questions. I'm particularly referring to self-deception.

It's true but you're still not off the hook. Because you will smile at the grocer in order to get him to put the nicer tomatoes on the scale and not the rotting ones. As a response, he corrupts you by going along so that you become a returning customer. These are communication signals. If I send a positive sign towards someone, they will presumably reciprocate.

Can we narrow it down to material, financial things?

That's only a part of it, obviously, the more dangerous part. But these are judicial matters that could be very precisely determined with the help of the appropriate laws that are to be created based on the appropriate sociological research data.

And what happens if it's exactly the corrupt who is screaming the loudest about corruption?

I know a Hungarian prime minister who bought a factory then a few years later he sold it with a thirty fold profit. And now he criticizes the current government for being corrupt. Corruption will always be a good piano piece to play in politics. In general, if I'm a minister I expect to have a good car and in a restaurant I don't want yesterday's leftovers to be served to me. Power comes hand in hand with certain corrupt prerogatives. You can't avoid it, such is civilization. To top it off, staying in power, retaining it, keeping the party hierarchy alive, keeping different people, who may not think exactly like I do, in the various clusters – to do all this without corruption is impossible. Democracy is a type of demagoguery after all. The Athenian democrats voted for the death of Socrates despite the fact that he just asked questions. So, were they corrupt, or were they not? We could formulate the question this way. Pericles, the founder of democracy, should have left Athens, the only city that was believed to be perfect at the time, because of alleged corruption offenses.

Is it possible to keep it between viable boundaries?

It is, with civilization and the judicial system. We break the rules while driving but if it has negative consequences we have to take the responsibility.

The quality of public discourse is at least this problematic. What are your thoughts on this?

The state of public discourse, the decline in its quality and the constant damaging of our language are all tell-tale signs of the status of our society. All languages, our mother tongue included, are based on a public consensus, it allows for the relatively objective exchange of different opinions. Language is our most precious national treasure. Therefore, it isn't at all indifferent how we handle this treasure, especially considering that the damages done to it are barely noticeable in our everyday lives. We treat our language

irresponsibly and its permanent impairments may become built into our present and future language usage. Otherwise, we have problems even at the basic level. We removed rhetoric from the high school curriculum; everybody can speak however they wish. Moreover, the official speakers on the radio and in the television seem to deliberately distort the canon of phonetics, who knows why... This phenomenon has consequences in public discourse, such as the abbreviations used in text messages, or the growing number of vulgar expressions, simply put, an unclean language. This method of speech, both on lower and higher levels, represents chaotic thinking. Unfortunately, the conscious “re-interpretation” of certain notions has also become part of the political weapon arsenal. Sometimes people don’t even know what to think when expressions like human rights, refugees, democratic opposition, philanthropic speculator, civil movements flood the otherwise unethical rhetoric – I won’t even go into further details. Who can validate these expressions? It seems to me that our deteriorating language usage that is turning into chaos indicates an irresponsible march that seems to be leading to a social chaos and the process is barely even covered up. We’ve seen this at least once before, when we called the loaded coup of Lenin a “revolution” and a “freedom fight”, and the subsequent mass murder “necessary cleansing.”

Over seventy, what would be the lesson learned, a brief credo?

There’s no home without rules. I wrote a series of poems about the cities where I lived in a book called ‘My ex-city.’ My search for home. Because there must be a home. You must accept it and it must accept you. It’s a difficult tussle... So far, I’ve published 12 books in Hungarian (two novels, three volumes of plays, 4 volumes of poems and three volumes of translated poems – in over 12 languages). But none of these were published in Hungary where I publish articles on a regular basis. I’ve remained a phenomenon from over the border.