THE ZIGZAG WAY OF THOUGHT
OF A HUNGARIAN POPULIST

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"In the beginning of this century the poets guided us to the West. Then we got so exhausted that we came back here in the midst of confusion. It was Moricz (Zsigmond), who led us back to the people, to the poorness, and to the Hungarian realities, where the future was breathing."

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We have various viewpoints on the origin of the political transformation from the communist regime in Eastern Europe. If we take an organizing process of the opposition groups such as the Democratic Forum [Demokrata Forum] or the League of Liberal Democrats in Hungary, it is the end of 1970s, when embryonic of opposition movements appeared. Needless to say that the Democratic Forum was a leading opposition party in the process of transformation in Hungary in the second half of 1980s and through the national elections in 1990 the Forum became the most influential governmental party.

At its inception, the Democratic Forum was not a political party and its leaders were mainly either populists or those who believed in giving priority to national values. The Gabor Bethlen Foundation was a predecessor of the populist oppo-

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2. Ieda, Osamu, Trails and now of Hungarian political reform, Mirai.Tokyo,1990, No.4&5.
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sition from a viewpoint of organizing process. The foundation was officially founded in 1985. This was the first case in the Kadar era, when the Hungarian authority gave official permission to opposition groups for making a political association. Before that time every sign of opposition was suppressed or at best ignored by the authority. Such a case was when Gyula Illyes and his followers asked official permission for making the Gabor Bethlen Foundation in 1979. The authority gave no answer to them for a long time. Anyway Illyes's initiative was monumental in instigating an open opposition movement in Hungarian political life under the Communist rule.

Gyula Illyes was, thus, a forerunner in the Hungarian political transformation as well as in the road to power of the Democratic Forum. Moreover the most influential radical right movement in post-communist Hungary, namely Istvan Csurka and his party, Hungarian Truth and Life, was directly influenced by Illyes through the movement of the Democratic Forum. It is also interesting for us to note that Illyes was one of the outstanding populist writers in the Inter-War period, who devoting themselves to making "pure Hungarians". More over he grew up in a conservative social atmosphere.

Illyes was not a politician nor did he want to be a politician, but his words worked politically and he himself was conscious of their political effects. The essay, "Answer to Herder and Ady" written by him in 1977 was a good example of this attitude and was the last and most important political message he published. In the essay Illyes took up the question of the Hungarian minority in Transylvania as an issue to be discussed, and concluded by referring to Gottfried von Herder and Endre Ady:

"Hungarians are a minority even in their own country, being sandwiched between the Slavs, the Germans, and other nations. Within a few centuries we will never hear their language at all.' These words of Herder were written not as a prophecy but as a conviction regarding the situation in those days. ...

Ady confesses: 'Before noon, I get myself to sleep but soon I wake up suddenly from a short dream. I look around the disgusting room in a

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hotel, feeling myself as if I was a slave in a prison. Yes, I'm alone in the world. Do you understand what I'm thinking? You may laugh, but I am the last Hungarian, who now wakes up and is putting on his clothes.' I am sure that we should come back to this problem even now. Unless we respond to Herder's question, we could give no worthy answers to Ady's confession. ...

Heaven was not so merciful in the age of Ady, and less so to his later generations. Why, Ady's predictions turned out, one after another, to be facts. In the midst of this situation, however, we dared not look reality in the face. Ady definitely tried many times to say a single word from his withered lips; it was Transylvania.4

Territorial revisionism was not Illyes's goal and he never considered it in the essay. What he wanted to insist on was "to look the facts in the face" regarding the minority problem in Transylvania and then to look at the on-going national crisis as a whole. Of course on the surface the essay was literary but between the lines it had a political message as well. Namely, the essay was a radical criticism of the communist regime, which, according to Illyes's implication, could not even recognize the fact, that there existed a minority problem. Illyes rather explicitly displayed his negative opinion about the Kadar regime just after the above quotation.

"Once the Marxist parties, led by the Lenin's party, named a peace treaty as a historical crime, by which one third of population speaking in Hungarian - more than three million people altogether - was left beyond the border. The community speaking in Hungarian was divided. Ady opposed seeking help to make this situation better from Heaven or the Horthy regime. Instead he felt a spiritual community with the neighboring countries. People expected Masaryk or Benes, not the Hungarian political leaders, to provide for the Hungarians. Then came another era. Here is another question which we have to face. Namely, there came an age, when even a specialist in minority problems who stands on a socialist platform

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expects a chain of mutual relationships based on almost the messianism in the Old Testament or at least on the Millenarism in New Testament. ... Today the younger generation could understand Ady only when they took in the underlying significance Ady's words as a response to the conclusion of Herder and others. If we want to confront the true Ady, we have to look not at Herder but his enthusiastic students and those who deprived of Herder's prophecy.”

Here Illyes declared with carefully selected words that the existing socialist regime had no possibility of solving the minority problem. And if we know the background of his conclusion, we understand its deeper meaning. Namely, his criticism is implicitly, but undoubtedly, of the leader of Communist Party, Janos Kadar. “A specialist in minority problems who stands on socialism” can be none other than Kadar himself.

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In a speech on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday in 1972, Kadar presented his definition of the 1956’s affair very frankly.

“A very serious and critical situation occurred in 1956. The 1956 affair has already received an academic label; "anti-revolution". We know that this is the academic definition of what happened in 1956. However we have another way of calling it. Namely, a ‘national tragedy’. This is acceptable to everyone among us without exception.”

This was not the only time, that Kadar talked about 1956. Counter to our supposition, Kadar took up the topic from time to time in order to authorize his regime. In his last years, for example, Kadar talked very proudly about 1956 with the following words:

“I feel happy, because I had the opportunity to make a decision. At first

5. Ibid.
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almost no one understood me. But later the majority of people understood.”

Indeed “the majority of people” supported him. The same article said:

“The people had accepted Kadar by his appeasement policy. If we forgot this fact, we altered the past. The world also adopted Kadar. International journalism had regarded him as a puppet of the Soviet Union, because he gained power ‘with the Soviet sword’ in November 1956. But twenty years later they wrote: Kadar is the only person among the communist leaders, who could win a free election. Indeed, The Hungarian people also felt so. They could not help having tears in their eyes when they saw on TV Kadar consulting with influential politicians of the Western world, such as Papa, Blandt, Schmidt, Mitterrand, ... and so on. Why, their germinating national consciousness was shaken and woken up, and the people were deeply impressed when they heard that these world leaders highly reputed Hungary and her leader, Kadar.”

Needless to say, Kadar was very popular for a long time and this was due to his economic reform, his not so strict public policy and his sincere personality. It was said that the appeasement policy compensated Kadar for his dark past or unpopularity because of his “betrayal” in 1956. But the above quotation tells us more; namely, that Kadar and the people came to share a view relating to 1956. Kadar was successful in making his people accept, not unwillingly, his political choice in 1956. The “national tragedy”, as Kadar named the affair, turned to be the common definition of 1956 among the people.

Indeed Kadar already addressed the people about the on-going affair appealing to the idea of nation on the very day, November 1. in 1956, just before he disappeared before the people and was supposed to have gone to the Soviet side. His historical speech began with the following words:

“We make an appeal to the members of former Working People’s Party at this critical moment. You got membership of the party in order to show loyalty to the people and the native land or in order to do sincere service

7. Magyar Hirlap, Budapest, 1989, Jul. 15
for the pure ideal of socialism. But Rakosi and his followers led the Working People’s Party to ruin by their blind and fully erroneous policies. The party became an organ for dictatorship. By the risky policy they shamelessly wasted the party’s moral ideals, which you had created through the self-sacrificing and tough fights in the old world for the sake of national independence and democratic development. I say to you with all my heart, that the people’s revolt has reached a turning point. Will the revolt give a momentum to ensure the positive result of an on-going affair for the Hungarian democratic parties? Or will it turn out to be an obvious anti-revolution? ...

Our new party (Socialist Workers Party) guards the pride of nation and the independence of the country against any attacks, and will keep them in the future as well. Based on the national independence we will build up a fraternity with the progressive socialist forces or parties in the world. And on the same basis we will seek friendship with every country regardless of the distance between us and them.”

Here Kadar proposed two tasks: One was to keep the national pride and the other was to maintain the socialist regime. It is enough for us to note here that he mentioned, firstly, the nation, then the pride of native land, or the national independence and finally that socialism follows all these. We do not know whether he did it consciously or not, but it is sure that Kadar put a stronger accent on national consciousness, not on socialism. For Kadar 1956 was, primarily, a people’s revolt from the viewpoint of the first task and was, to a lesser extension, “anti-revolution” from the viewpoint of the second task. In the speech in 1972 it was obvious that he interpreted this ambivalence from the side of the people’s revolt again. We can suppose that Kadar had a consistent opinion on 1956 from the beginning and the expression, “national tragedy”, came from his honest feeling.

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It was Kadar whom Gyula Illyes de facto criticized by naming him "a specialist in minority problems who stands on socialist platform" or as one of "those who deprived Herder of his prophecy". The majority of people accepted Kadar as a man who saved the Hungarian nation, but Illyes rejected him as such a hero because Kadar was the very person who put Herder's prophecy and Ady's presentiment into practice; namely, the realization of the evanescence of the Hungarian people. According to him Kadar could save the people only by going down a tragic path and could do nothing but watch the critical situation of the Hungarian minority in Transylvania, which seemed to be more and more serious to the people in Hungary during the course of the 1970s. Illyes wanted to enlighten the people to expect no more from Kadar or the socialist friendship, because he said it could bring no better resolution for the Hungarian minority than "messianism" or "Millenarism" could do. He concluded that "we should look at those who deprived Herder of his prophecy in the face" as they are.

Illyes put Ady's spiritual community with neighbors in the place of socialism and interpreted the essence of the Transylvania issue:

"Hungary can be very proud of the Toleration Declaration issued in 1606, which was born out of the enthusiastic debates between Protestants on religious faith concerning public life and spirit. It was in Transylvania where the first toleration declaration was introduced in the European continent, and where freedom of religion and its practice in their mother tongue was realized." 9

The Transylvania issue was, to Illyes and according to his interpretation of Ady, not merely a Hungarian minority problem but more than it; namely it was a proposition for the co-existence of various peoples. This was "the true face of Ady" and the response of Illyes's generation to Herder and Ady. We have to recall here that under the Kadar era Ady was officially regarded as a prophet of the socialist revolution in 1919.

Illyes's essay was epochmaking, because it presented the Hungarian minority problem as a political issue and criticized the Kadar regime and the socialist solution of minority problems. Further, the essay was historical because it

9. Illyés, Gyula, Válasz Herdarnak és Adynak

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appeared in a newspaper, the Hungarian Nation [Magyar Nemzet], which was one of the most popular newspapers in Hungary. The essay was written not as an underground publication for the small circles of opposition, but for the common people in a form of newspaper essay.

The "Answer to Herder and Ady" created a stir and in the following year Illyes put the essay into his new book entitled Spirit and force, which was however suppressed. It was only in the years of political transformation at the end of the 1980s, that the authorities gave permission to sell it. Anyway Illyes and his followers in 1979 decided to make the Bethlen Foundation in order to save the historical and cultural inheritance in Transylvania and to pass them to the future generations. Bethlen was a prince of Transylvania from 1613 to 1629 and practiced the Toleration Declaration.

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Various moves for the political transformation in Hungary developed into mass movements in the late middle of the 1980s, which meant a strong pressure against the regime. At the peak of this movement a mass of people occupied the Hero’s square in the center of Budapest on June 27th 1988. This mass demonstration, organized by the Democratic Forum, was held in order to make an appeal against Ceausescu’s rural policy which seemed, at least for the Hungarians, to destroy the villages and their traditions in Transylvania, including the Hungarian ones. Soon after the mass demonstration the Hungarian parliament made a resolution against the Romanian rural policy in July and the following month the new chief secretary of Hungarian Socialist Workers Party, Karoly Grosz made an official visit to Romania. Grosz appealed to Ceausescu to defend the minority rights of Hungarians in Transylvania. By that time the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party decided to face up to the problem, pushed to do so by the mass movement, and Grosz tried to gain the people’s support by attempting to solve the minority problem.10

If Grosz was a skilled diplomat, he himself and the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party might have also survived the following years a little more successfully. However he disappointed his party and his people, by coming back from the neighboring country with no meaningful fruits. Grosz was not the worst alternative. Rather he was welcomed by the people when he came to
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power after Kadar in May of the year. But soon after the unsuccessful diplomatic meeting he lost popularity and leadership within and outside the party. Hungary then had no further means of officially negotiating with Romania, because the country had played the final card in the diplomatic game. The relationship between the two countries reached a complete deadlock and more and more Hungarian refugees and immigrants arrived at the Hungarian border and then they settled in the bigger cities or in the capital, Budapest where the municipal office opened a relief center for refugees at the beginning of the year. On the other hand it was also immediately after the Grosz’s visit to Romania, when new movements started in the open political arena in the country. Namely, the right and left wings of the party began to make formal factions and among the opposition organizing moves also became more and more intensive. At the end of this preclusive process a political agreement was born for transition to pluralism from the one party system between the communist party and the opposition groups. Thus the Transylvania issue played a decisive role in the development of political transformation and in its very early stages the communist party led by Grosz seemed already unreliable in the eyes of the people regarding the issue.

Originally, as we saw, Illyes talked about Transylvania in order to create a spiritual community with neighboring countries. But in the course of political development his followers gradually shifted their focus on the Transylvania issue to the question of Hungarians’ minority rights. At last Transylvania became a symbol of national tragedy and a political slogan for defending Hungarian minority rights, and thus, as a result, the Transylvania issue “emancipated” Hungarian people to speak openly of Hungarian national traditions and cultural values. We remember that the most frequently used slogan on the holiday of March 15. (in memory of March revolution in 1848) in 1989 was “Magyar, the word is to be beautiful again [Újra lesz szép a szó, magyar]”. The strengthening national consciousness reached its highest point during a referendum debate on

10. Here we had better mention two other issues, with which the three issues later became the main items for political negotiations between the Communist Party and opposition groups in the early stages of political transformation; one was the political rehabilitation of Imre Nagy and other political victims. It was still impossible to talk about this issue in 1988. The other was the issue of the Danube power station, which did not interest the masses so much. Therefore the Transylvania issue was the first and single issue that attracted the masses and was accepted by the Communist regime as an “existing” issue.
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a new state emblem and the people eventually chose Saint Istvan's crown as the emblem.

This national emancipation was not, of course, fully due to Illyes, however he was, with no doubt, the pioneer in the process of rehabilitating national values. He, as we saw, appealed to the people to overcome the Kadar way to solve the minority question as early as 1977. Illyes's conclusion, that "Hungary can be very proud of Toleration Declaration", was not unfaithful. It should be appreciated in any case, yet the conclusion which directly and deeply attracted the people's interest and sympathy in the course of political development was not to "be very proud of Toleration Declaration" but "Hungary can be very proud." Illyes gave confidence to the people who had been forced to settle down in a ground of distorted national consciousness given by the tragic modern history of Hungary after the WW I, including the Kadar era as well. In the process of political awakening in the last years the confidence, which was awakened by Illyes, changed in the quality into an exclusive or self-flattering conviction of historical and national values.

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Now we return to the quotation at the beginning of this paper, where Illyes said that Moricz brought back the Hungarian intellectuals from Westernism to home. Moricz was the root of the populism in Hungary. The populists could be both on the extreme right and the extreme left,11 but everyone among them shared the same viewpoint, according to which the people or the peasants were an object to be affected and a goal to go back to as well. Yet, Illyes continued, this was not the only question that Moricz proposed. Illyes called Moricz "the greatest revolutionary writer in Hungary" and he interpreted a famous saying of Moricz: "No politics, just build a house".

"At that time the saying used to be understood in such a way that Moricz wanted to detach the people from the resistance movement and to direct the people's attention to other concerns. The left wing also thought in this way. But we should not forget the fact, that the anti-revolutionary forces

11 Sato, Noriko, op.cit.
were then much more skillful in influencing the masses. Moricz was conscious that the people at the bottom of society were easily incited by demagoguery. We ought to confess honestly a serious historical fact. Namely, some of the social democrats left the party as a result of propaganda by the Arrow Cross and became the combatants of the party. The Social Democratic Party did not grasp them well. When the poor and thoroughly ignored people went to politics, look what happened.”

Moricz didn’t idealize the people or the peasants at all. He knew that they could be social democrats and also be Fascists, depending on the political, economical and social situations. So Moricz kept an objective standpoint about the people. Illyes interpreted him not as an idealist but as a realist and appreciated his enlightening message to the people:

“Moricz tripped around from town to town and from village to village making speeches. He said: ‘You should not ask for bricks produced in factories. In any case you could not buy them because of the price. How is it possible to make them? We know how to make them by ourselves.’ This was a task for the greatest writer of Hungary. Moricz’s deep idea was shown in the following sentence and he explained it to the battered people in a simple and kind way. Help yourself. Because God doesn’t help you.’

Or in other words presented by Illyes:

“Peasants; they can be a nest for resistance in Hungary and be our possible stronghold. At the same time, however, they may be a problem that needs to be solved; namely, we have to bring them up into a nation. Ady and Moricz were those who most represented this idea.”

According to Illyes, the people or the peasantry could be a base of operations

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11 Sato, Noriko, op.cit.
12 Illyés, Gyula, A költő felel
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
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but could not be restored as they used to be. It was necessary “to bring them up into a nation” through cultivating within them a spirit of self help. This task was nothing but the most revolutionary work in Hungary. Illyes understood Moricz in such a way; to build a house was an appeal for Hungarian revolution in Moricz’s style. Illyes, on the other side, in his essay pointed out a limit to the romantic view about peasants from the same standpoint. We may recall a controversy over the populism in the Inter-War period, in which the main issue was around alternatives such as; to be Western capitalism or Eastern socialism, or the Third Way. Illyes now proposed no political alternatives, but political neutrality and a spirit of self help by the people themselves.

Illyes rehabilitated an old question proposed in the Inter War period but the question was renewed, as we saw, in Illyes’s way. Why would Illyes rehabilitate and renew the question? Though in the newspaper essay he didn’t write anything explicitly on this regard, reading between the lines we come to notice it. That is; Illyes was discussing 1956 and criticized again the Kadar’s conclusion in 1956. The essence of the argument was in his recollection of “serious historical fact” and “when the poor and thoroughly ignored people went to politics, look what happened.” After the 1956 Illyes was forced to present himself as a socialist, though he felt sympathy with the rebels. 1956 was, needless to say, a very “serious historical fact” for him and in the affair in 1956 “the poor and thoroughly ignored people went to politics” literally. He could not, with no doubt, talk again about the people or populism unless he drew another conclusion about 1956 by which he could take over Kadar. Who were the hundreds of thousands people or political offenders blamed for “anti-revolutionary” or “Horthyist” acts by the authority of Kadar regime? Who were the people rising against Rakosi and who were the people going to the side of anti-revolution? Kadar drew an exact boundary between the two kinds of people and regarded the people rising against Rakosi as supporters of his regime. On the contrary he punished the other kind of people as an anti-revolutionary. But there was no exact border between them according to Illyes. He accepted even the people who were blamed for anti-revolutionary activities. The most important or “serious” fact for him was that again in 1956 “the poor and thoroughly ignored people went to politics”. Illyes rejected Kadar’s conclusion on 1956 such as “national tragedy”. Neither would he agree with those who were simply satisfied to conclude that 1956 was a people’s revolt or revolution. He denied any kind of interpretation of 1956 from a politically
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orientated viewpoint. His revolution was not to go to politics but for the people themselves to build a house, and for him a populist was such an intellectual as Moricz, who cultivated the people by walking around from village to village. This was Illyes’s basic standpoint relating to 1956.

Illyes thus started his argument on populism with regard to the Inter-War period and ended it by criticizing the socialist or Kadar’s way of understanding the people. Illyes once supported Hungarian racism in the Inter-War period but his rebuilt populism was not simple restoration of the third way nor political fanaticism, according to which everything could be solved by politics or racist nationalism. In the course of the political transformation in Hungary, however, Illyes’s followers and the other oppositions went to politics, and they expected more and more from the political changes and guided the people to think in the same way.

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Illyes’s argument on the people interests us in another respect also. Namely he wrote that “we have to pull them up to a nation”. In the nineteenth century Szechenyi, Kossuth and other political leaders also from time to time made an appeal to create a nation. For them, of course, the nation to be created was, first of all, political one, but the task to be done in both case was the same from such a point of view that the peasants or the people should be cultivated to be a nation, and the task should be done by the intellectuals.

Illyes proposed the same task to be done at the end of 1970s. Why did Illyes identify the same task again? Of course it could be a rhetorical flourish to call his readers’ attention to national consciousness and political issues such as the Hungarian minority in Transylvania. Maybe this was a part of the reasoning. But neither can we deny that Illyes was seriously thinking of a nation to be created. The Hungarian people or peasantry, politically speaking, had never been a nation, because they had no independent rights of political participation in either the Inter-War period or under the regime of communism. Economically speaking, the people’s possibilities for development were very limited in the Inter-War period and in the later period they were even deprived of their lands. Culturally speaking, they were inspired with the Great Hungarianism after the Trianon, which was no more than an illusion and was not based on even a spirit
of ethno-nationalism, though the peasantry kept folkloric traditions. Illyes must have noticed that the Hungarian people had had no conditions for cultivating themselves as a nation politically, economically and culturally in the Inter-War period nor in the communist era. Meanwhile the peasantry or the core of “the people” almost disappeared in the course of agricultural collectivization and socialist industrialization, and, as a result, a new mass people came into being, who had only a tragic or pessimistic self-conscious regard to their national fate.

The task laying before Illyes was partly modern and partly post-modern. The trail of Illyes’s thought on the people and the nation is shared by intellectuals in other East European countries, too. Further, the zigzag way is not such an unusual case, rather very sympathetic to those who took the tasks of modernization on their shoulders in non West European areas, like, for instance, in Japan, where a controversy over so called modernity is attracting the people once again after an interval of more than half a century.