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A Statement
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LABELS

In 1921, two babies were born in a Budapest hospital from two mothers who were in the same room of the maternity ward. One child was Catholic, the other Jewish. Since the two babies were born within the hour, the nurses became so busy that they exchanged them.

Before continuing the story of the two babies, I have to explain how in 1921, unlike a few years later, a Catholic and a Jewish mother could be placed in the same hospital room. This was possible because it happened just three years after the end of the First World War, in which the assimilated Jewry of Hungary fought without any discrimination; it also happened because, in those times, the labels under which people were categorized were so numerous that the amount of hatred fed into the population by the rulers, in order to divide and conquer, had to be distributed into so many directions that the Jews, for the time being, had to settle for a small dosage of hatred — as did the other label-owners, like the ethnic groups living in the country (Serbians, Croatians, Saxonians, Schwabs, Romanians, Valachs, Czechs, Slovaks, Ruthenians, Italians, Gypsies, etc.), or like minority religious groups (Calvinists, Lutherans, Greek Orthodox, Evangelists, etc.), who were all incited against one another. This is the main reason why the swap of the two babies in 1921 was still possible.

About one decade later, when totalitarian governments took power in several countries of Europe, they began simplifying and polarizing the labelling of people. Hatred was no longer divided democratically because, being in a hurry, the radical rulers needed one favourite scapegoat to concentrate on, in order to strengthen by fear their grip on the people, so

they selected the most suitable subjects according to their local needs (like the Communists in Spain, the Capitalists in the Soviet Union, the Jews in Germany, etc.). All labels — whether they were dignifying or humiliating — were meted out to certain groups, not because they did something good or evil, not because they deserved a reward or a punishment for something they did or failed to do, but merely for circumstances beyond their control, for given facts they couldn't help, like having been born into a rich or a poor family, into an Aryan or a Jewish family, and so on. The label-makers of Europe in those years were strongly visual men; they selected colours to go with their labels: thus, the German Nazis wore brown shirts, the Italian Fascists black shirts, the Hungarian Nazis green shirts; the colour of the Communists was red, the Jews were identified by yellow (stars on their chests or bands on their arms). Europe in the 1930s was very much like the Rubik's Cube in the 1980s (the only exception being the colour white on the cube — the symbol of purity and innocence).

When the two babies at the beginning of my story became ten years old, the swap was somehow discovered; but by then neither family was emotionally capable of correcting the error: during a decade the bonds of love had grown unbreakable. While keeping their secret, both the parents and the boys remained close friends, despite the changing times. That's how it happened that when they became young men, the Jewish boy who was labelled as a pure Aryan since birth saved the life of the born-Catholic boy whose freshly gotten label predestined him to be exterminated by the racists of his own race. This story, more forcefully than anything else, proved to me in my early youth the complete senselessness of labelling people according to nationality, place of birth, date of birth, religion, class origin, sex, age, the colour of skin, the colour of hair, the colour of eyes, the length of nose, the number of pimples, or whatever. No matter which boy would have been killed, the Aryan or the Jewish one, according to or in spite of the law of those times, it would have been the criminal murder of an innocent human being.

Among the many Hungarian writers of that age, quite a few kept their integrity. There was one, especially, who wasn't willing to accept any label, either for himself or for others. His name was Frigyes Karinthy. He didn't identify with any group; he belonged nowhere, but this non-belonging meant for him an extremely strong belonging to Man, to Mankind, to Humanity. As a humorist, he was tremendously popular, but as a philosopher he had hardly any followers then. Today, most Hungarians are enthusiastic about his profound ideas. He was (and remains) my spiritual father, the Master who first inspired me to feel, to think, to express myself, to be considerate, to have high ideals, to understand others as if they were me: in other words, to write. At least, that's what it means for me to be a writer. (Of course, it means many other things too, but this is the foundation on which all those other things are built.)



Getting rid of the labels so fashionable in Europe was not the last reason why I left my country in 1956. But the free world didn't deliver me from evil labels. In the first five years I was in limbo because I wasn't a Canadian citizen yet, but I was no longer a Hungarian either. Not a British subject yet, I called myself a British object. Being only a landed immigrant, one day I proclaimed to a new friend of mine in the CBC's shipping department: "We British people should stick together!" For a while, instead of "Good Morning," everybody in the CBC greeted me with this sentence. (Years later, one of my supervisors called me a "bloody Hungarian." Since this incident happened just two weeks after getting my Canadian citizenship, I sent him an office memo in which I requested in the future he call me a "bloody Canadian" instead.) During these years, I couldn't write for English publications because I didn't speak the language, nor could I write for publications in Hungary because, for having illegally left the country, I was considered an enemy.

The only thing I could do was to write for Hungarian ethnic papers in Toronto. But I had to choose from among them,

for each one served a special group in the Hungarian sub-society. One of them was a weekly paper published by and for old Communists who in 1919 fled the so-called White Terror in Hungary, after the defeat of the so-called Red Terror. The readership of another paper consisted mainly of latent Fascists and war criminals who escaped when the Nazis lost the Second World War against the Allies. A third one was geared to the Hungarian-speaking Jewish businessmen who left Hungary when the new Communist state began nationalizing private enterprise. Since I was simply a poet and writer who expressed his thoughts and feelings in his mother-tongue, none of these organs suited my integrity, on the one hand; on the other, they wouldn't have accepted me since I did not match any of their labels. So, for a while, I wrote articles and humoresques for a fourth newspaper, not because I shared its ideology, but because a friend of mine (Andrew Achim), who was an editor of this paper, after almost laughing himself to death upon hearing my funny stories read at my weekly house parties, simply grabbed them and published them, without even asking my permission to do so (which, I admit, quite flattered my artistic vanity). For the sake of fairness, I must note here that during the last quarter of a century all the aforementioned press organs were either dissolved or sold to new owners or they changed their views due to the "melting-pot" boiling within the Hungarian tile of the Canadian "mosaic." (Sorry for the confused image, I hope it's clear.)

Later on, I wrote, drew, designed, edited, laid out and published my own literary monthly magazine which, after about a year, collapsed, partly because it aimed at the general Hungarian-speaking public. This mandate confused my advertisers who — unable to think but in labels — kept asking me: "But tell me, is this magazine for leftists or rightists, for Catholics or Protestants, for Jews or Gendarmes, for junior or senior citizens?" My answer: "For Hungarians," left them in deep quandary. Not the first and not the last time in my life, I realized that I was a misfit. Without the Hungarian labels, I was a Hungarian misfit.

When I approached Canadian publishers with the idea of publishing one or two of my books, first they asked me if I

was a well-known writer or poet in Hungary (which I was not). My pen-name was extremely popular among children for whom I wrote, but I was just about to publish my first book of one hundred poems under my own name by a dissident publishing company when the Revolution broke out, and after its defeat I chose to leave my country rather than publish party-line poetry or publish dissident poetry and be jailed, or deported, or silenced afterwards. In the first years of my exile, I wrote only in my mother tongue, so translation into English was another (if not the greatest) problem.



When several years after the Revolution the Hungarian government realized their need for hard currency, it changed our labels from "Counter-Revolutionary Hooligans" to "Our Beloved Fellow-Country-Men Living Abroad," and opened before us the gates of the Iron Curtain.

During my visits as a tourist in my own country, I tried my best to explore possibilities of publishing my Hungarian works there. The editors, personally, liked my work, but they had a problem labelling me: "If you are a Hungarian poet, why do you live in Canada? If you are a Canadian poet, why do you want to publish in Hungary?" In vain did I try to explain to them that being a poet does not depend on the geographical location of the poet's body, or on the political system under which the publisher functions, but on the linguistic and literary value of the poems. (I have to clarify here that the poems I tried to publish in Hungary were not at all hostile to Hungary; they spoke about the change, the culture shock, the homesickness, about the schizoid emotions of an exile between two worlds. Actually, a writer-friend of mine in Hungary, after reading my work, told me: "You are more of a Hungarian patriot in Canada than we are here, in Hungary.")

One sympathetic publisher finally proposed a compromise to me: "Let's pretend," he said, "that you are a Canadian poet who wrote your poems in English, and we will call the poems we publish in Hungarian the Hungarian translations of your original English poems." "But I cannot lie about this,"

I said, “these are my original Hungarian poems!” “I understand,” he said, “but there is no precedent! We have never done such a thing! We can publish Hungarian poets living in Hungary either in Hungarian or in English translation. We can publish English poets either in English or in Hungarian translation. We can publish the English work of Hungarian poets living in exile, in Hungarian translation. But we have never published the original Hungarian poetry of Hungarian poets living in exile, in Hungarian, in Hungary! We just cannot start a new trend! Try again in two or three years, perhaps the political atmosphere will change by then.” This was the day when I defined for myself what a “misfit” was: “A misfit is a human being who tries to remain a human being despite the surrounding pressure called mankind.”



Although I have been talking in the first person, I know that most poets and writers who have come from behind the Iron Curtain face similar problems. If you are an Italian, a Swedish, a French, or a German author, you can publish your work both in Canada, on one hand, and in Italy, Sweden, France, or Germany (West Germany, I mean), on the other.

If you are a Hungarian, Czech, Bulgarian, Albanian, Polish, East German, etc., author behind the Iron Curtain, you cannot write what you want to write: you have to write what others want you to write.

If you are an exile, you can write what you want to write, but you cannot publish your original work back home, unless it criticizes the country of your exile which gave you shelter and accepted you. Nor can you publish your work written in your mother tongue in exile, unless you can afford to be your own publisher. Let me express here my appreciation to the Multicultural Section of the Secretary of State in Canada which has the power — unlimited politically, but limited financially — to break this rule.

“Are you as famous in Canada as Marshall McLuhan or Glenn Gould?” a publisher asked me in Budapest. His question

was similar to the one asked twenty some years earlier: "Are you well-known in Hungary?" Before you are allowed to enter and enrich the poetry and literature of your own country, of your own language, first you have to make a name for yourself in an alien country; you have to prove that you can speak and write in another language; you have to produce bestsellers for a culture other than that which nourished you from birth: this is what the cultural authorities of your native land demand from you, before even reading the first line of your poem that you wrote in your own (and their own) language. The same "cultural workers" did publish manuscripts written by workers, peasants, and cleaning-ladies who emigrated from Hungary to Canada and didn't make it: these books are called "life-stories" and serve a double purpose: They are useful anti-capitalist propaganda for the population of Hungary and they also prove that they publish books from Hungarians living abroad. Briefly, this is the choice: You must become either a celebrated writer in non-Hungarian or a failure as a non-writer, if you want to be published in Hungary.

It is possible that the greatest living poets and writers of the Iron Curtain countries, the greatest innovators of their languages, live abroad, yet their works are sentenced to oblivion, due to mindless discrimination based on arbitrary and irrelevant criteria.

Such is the unique cross that we carry, which is one not shared by any other kind of artist, only by the handler of the pen. A painter, a sculptor, an architect, a composer, a musician, a dancer, a performer living in exile is *not* banned from the public of the fatherland, perhaps because the label-makers think (and they do think quite erroneously) that their message *can* be interpreted in *many* ways. But a message, clearly expressed by the written word, seems to be too unambiguous to them. If you say something, it means exactly what you said, and therefore it is more dangerous than colours, shapes, melodies, or movements, which are but the symbols of the Word, of Logos.

The cross we carry is unique also because the written word of people living in totalitarian systems can be trans-

lated into any language of the free world. Democracy is not vengeful: it does not set geographical or political conditions for its publications. There exists a marked imbalance between authors who live in dictatorships being accepted in democracies, on one hand, and authors who live in exile being rejected in dictatorships, on the other.

The righting of this imbalance may be one of the tasks that the Human Rights Commission should deal with, in the future.

Let me finish my short speech with an even shorter poem of mine, which I wrote recently:

In a country
where everyone
is searching for
identity,
I am
an alien
for I'm already
identical.

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