Chapter 9

Of communism, compromise and Central Europe: the scholarly persona under authoritarianism

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Introduction

What does it take to be a (good) historian under a system of institutionalized repression? What kind of professional and ethical choices are scholars compelled to make and what motivates them in reaching these decisions? What are the implications of the exposure to an oppressive regime for one's professional career and does the study of scholarly persona in 'exceptional conditions' endorse, refine or refute existing discussions on the subject? This chapter engages with these questions by interrogating the work, life and self-fashioning of one of the foremost Hungarian historians of the communist period, Péter Hanák (1921–97), whose achievements were significant in placing Hungarian history in a transnational perspective and studying it with the most up-to-date research methods. As a scholar who experienced the 'terrors of history' under two authoritarian regimes, for Hanák, history studied and history lived were inextricably linked. This can be evidenced from an anecdote which he related in his memoirs in a jocular tone. In mature years Hanák had to undergo urgent heart surgery. When the internal specialist who had examined him beforehand got to see the image emerging on the X-ray screen he exclaimed: 'Gracious heavens! On these arteries I can see the history of the entire twentieth century!'[1]

This chapter examines Hanák's choices of subjects for historical study, and it ponders to what extent his life experiences, educational background and the intellectual tradition in which he became socialized influenced those choices. All these factors contributed to the makeup of his 'scholarly DNA' which, like real DNA, in interaction with his environment made him the scholar that he became. In that context, this chapter will reveal that Hanák's persona was deeply influenced by the legacy of civic-liberal patriotism which had its origins in *fin-de-siècle* Austria-Hungary. The chapter discusses his *ars poetica* as a historian and his activities as a public

intellectual. It reveals that Hanák forged his own persona by navigating his way across a range of personae. From these, he absorbed characteristics which, at first glance, might not necessarily appear to be always reconcilable with *one* distinct persona. In his work, in his historical analyses and in his life choices Hanák was first and foremost a 'compromiser', which justifies the special attention which the article pays to this notion. In a broader context, this study is also concerned with the ways in which historians interpreted national history under the communist period and asks to what extent their persona influenced their assessment. To that end, it shows that Hanák found his ideal, or, as he put it, his 'utopia', in the form of a civic, cosmopolitan patriotism. Scholarly personae emerge and disappear within specific contexts and the fashioning of a new persona cannot take place without having recourse to certain older, existing ones.

One possible advantage of the conceptualizations that take the notion of persona as their point of departure is that they appear to do less homogenizing than traditional conceptualizations that revolve around 'schools' and 'generations'. They also have the advantage of bringing to the fore divisions and fault lines within the profession. For example, such cleavages could include religious and political divides and the emphasis on specialized research versus preference for writing for the general public. These potentials render the concept of scholarly persona particularly inspirational for pondering the question whether and to what extent historians at a certain time and in a certain place share some common understanding of what it means to be a historian in the first place.[2] Studies that approach this fundamental question include short-term or *longue durée* perspectives, while geographically they mainly focus on Europe and North America.[3] The feature that they appear to share is to take as their point of departure a scholar in an unexceptional situation. This may include the historian dusting off documents in the archives or beavering away in a study. Another variant may be the historian surrounded by students at the university and becoming the founder of a 'school'. Surely, alternatives also exist: for example, historians who prefer not to lock themself in their study, but engage in politics, or even perform public roles. The martyred historian, who paid with his/her life for insisting on her/his principles constitutes another persona; suffice it to think of Marc Bloch. Nevertheless, most often political engagement by the historian is largely a voluntary act, which certainly might involve risks, but not risking one's life. Existing conceptualizations tend to locate the notion of persona 'at the intermediary stage between the individual biography and the social institution'.[4] This study addresses the intricate connection between these levels and it investigates how they become shaped under repressive societal conditions. As such it seeks to widen existing focus primarily on 'ordinary' situations in larger

and better-known academic cultures. Ultimately, it invites reflection on the question to what extent the 'core' and nature of a scholar's work may or may not be left intact by external circumstances and what agency (if at all) scholars themself possess *vis-à-vis* those circumstances.

Living with a 'stain'

To what extent and how then does the 'permanent state of exception' – the inescapability of the dictates of an authoritarian regime – become imprinted on the scholarly persona? Péter Hanák produced a vibrant autobiographical essay, *Ragaszkodás az utópiához* (*Insistence on Utopia*), first and foremost intended for his two sons, which may provide a suitable point of departure for taking a closer look into this question. As we shall see, his book was not devoid of self-justification. In fact, its main motivation was to seek justification for his enthusiasm for the communist system for a short period after World War II. During that period his ideological commitment was rewarded with important positions, from which he was able to do harm to some of his colleagues in the name of 'class struggle', something which left a stain on his reputation for the rest of his life. If the entire twentieth century was mirrored on Hanák's arteries, the essay reveals that two experiences in particular were of crucial significance: the Holocaust, in which he lost his entire family; and the 'blood-stained' revolution of 1956 which left him with an injury and cost him his university job.

Hanák was born in 1921 in Southern Hungary, in the mid-size city of Kaposvár, into a poor Jewish family. Although an outstanding pupil, who contributed to his family's maintenance by tutoring his less gifted but more affluent classmates, Hanák was denied entry to university by anti-Semitic legislation, the so-called *numerus clausus* which seriously restricted the acceptance of students of Jewish origin at universities. Instead, Hanák became a metal worker in a big factory and a trade unionist. In 1942, he was forced to enter Jewish labour service in the Hungarian army. Under adventurous conditions he succeeded in escaping and returning to Hungary, only to find that his parents had been gassed in Auschwitz and his brother had disappeared without a trace. Many young people in a similar situation chose to leave the country in the years that followed. Hanák would have been in a position to follow suit, as his father's brother, who settled down in the United States, invited him across and even offered to adopt him and finance his studies. Nevertheless, he denied the invitation. His decision to stay loyal to the country the leaders of which had sent his entire family to the gas chambers was motivated by a somewhat archaic form of patriotism.[5]

In the 'new order' that followed after the war Hanák was finally admitted to university to study History and Latin. In 1948 he was granted a one-year scholarship to undertake research in Rome on aspects of the Hungarian revolution, on its 100th anniversary. In 1949 the Communist Party achieved victory in massively fraudulent elections. In that year of the communist takeover, the 'purging' in academic life began. This entailed the victimization and marginalization of so-called 'bourgeois historians', many of whom had studied or worked in Western Europe during the interwar period. Hanák was actively involved in those purges: he observed some of his senior colleagues and produced reports on them which contributed to their victimization and elimination for a period of time from the historical profession. Hanák made several attempts to explain and justify this involvement in his biography, by repeatedly asking the question 'how could I identify with this inhuman regime?' He argued that everything in the party was subordinated to the realization of communism, and as a consequence external pressure often became internal imperative.[6] He did not deny that the fear of prison, torture or loss of status constituted coercive factors, but he found that an even more significant consideration was the fear of yet another identity crisis: he was an orphan and the party became his family. If he had given up his total commitment, that would have led to his excommunication and falling into an empty space. Hence 'this monster state was for a long time the object of my identification'.[7]

Lastly, Hanák argued that in his situation – a young man of Jewish origin – no alternative to the Communist Party existed. He claimed that when in 1945 he was walking the streets of Budapest, stumbling upon corpses, and when he saw the total bankruptcy of the old regime, joining the communists remained his only option. Other parties did not appear to be capable of preventing the return of fascism and the Social Democratic party looked old-fashioned and inefficient.[8] At that stage it was not yet visible that the new threat was arriving not from the right but from the left. To what extent was this claim self-exoneration?

One of the most accomplished *émigré* historians, István Deák (b. 1928), who became professor at Columbia University and later helped Hanák's socialization in American academia during his stays there, gave his views on this matter. Deák was very appreciative of Hanák's scholarly qualities. This however, did not exempt him from criticism. To that end, Deák noted that, while Hanák's readiness to confront his past was laudable and did not find many followers among his generation, he never managed to make the ultimate step in his self-criticism. This would have been the realization that his support of the regime was not driven merely by idealism and fear, but also by the promise of privileges and the appetite

for power. According to Deák, it was not inevitable that a young, talented man would choose the Communist Party, even if he had been a victim of the previous regime.[9]

Around 1953–54, when the corpses from the show trials and the prisons of the secret police started to emerge, as tortured people were released from prison, it became more and more difficult to deal with the 'cognitive dissonance' between ideological dictates and everyday realities. But Hanák's 'awakening' only took place somewhat later, in 1956, when he found himself in the midst of revolutionary events.[10] Two days after the outbreak of the revolution, his students at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest requested that, together with the dean of the Faculty of Humanities, Hanák represent their demands for autonomy during the political negotiations. This became his *dies irae*. The streets were full of protesters who demanded the removal of the old guard of party leadership, the withdrawal of Soviet troops, a national government and complete amnesty for every participant in the events. Yet this day which started triumphantly turned into a tragic one when Soviet soldiers and Hungarian secret police members started to fire into the crowd. Hanák himself was shot in the leg, which required an operation to remove the bullet and which also 'removed' him from centre-stage in the coming events. His colleague, the dean, was shot several times in the forehead and died immediately.

Following the revolution, back at the University, Hanák refused to withdraw his statement that educational autonomy and reform were necessary at his faculty. As a result, he was expelled from the university, but could take refuge at the Institute for History of the Hungarian Academy which hosted several historians who were marginalized for political reasons. In the 1970s and 1980s the political system under the Kádár regime differed markedly from the earlier period in that the regime no longer imposed moral or existential pressure on people to *unconditionally* adjust to it. Hanák's commitment did not disappear altogether. He developed a certain distance, as he belonged to those 'reformists' who sought to change the system from within, to put a 'human face' on communism. In an interview conducted in the 1990s Hanák was asked how he thought it could be possible for many academics seemingly to have no problem whatsoever in coming to terms with the dictates of an unjust and authoritarian system and for some even to display cynical gestures of approval. In reaction he pointed out that the incidence of heart attacks, stomach ulcers and similar illnesses was exceptionally high among those people, in which he saw proof that they might have adjusted to the system from the outside, but not 'within'.[11] Hanák's own attempt at self-justification involved the claim that while for a short period of his life he indeed had believed in the world-saving communist doctrine and cherished the cult of smaller and

larger dictators, his ideological commitment never became 'total' in the Bolshevik sense of the word.[12]

From the 1960s onwards, Hanák was allowed to travel to international conferences, among which a conference held at Indiana University in 1966 on the nationalities of the dual monarchy represented a significant milestone. In 1971 he became visiting professor at Columbia and Yale Universities, later conducted research at Princeton, in Bielefeld and in Washington. In his later years, Hanák was fortunate to experience for a second time the collapse of 'an unhuman regime that had led the country into a cul-de-sac'.[13] He had known that the system would collapse one day, but did not expect to live to see it happen. 1989 thus became an *annus mirabilis* and, like many of his colleagues, for a split second he believed that this was the 'homecoming' of his utopia: the democratic, productive and peaceful co-existence of Danubian nations. Very soon, however, a rude awakening followed: with the resurrection of conservative nationalist forces the conflicts within Central Europe and within Hungary also intensified. As he later lamented, in order to realize utopia much more self-criticism, self-knowledge and political and intellectual 'vigilance' would have been necessary.[14] If utopia – a cosmopolitan ideal sensitive to regional characteristics – remained elusive, nevertheless Hanák symbolically contributed to its transmission. In 1991 he became one of the founders of the Central European University in Budapest, so in 1997, when he passed away, the hope remained that utopia could be kept alive. It is the irony of fate that two decades later, in 2017, the University found itself in danger of expulsion from the country by an 'illiberal' Hungarian government.

Finding a *modus vivendi*: a historian of many compromises

Hanák's professional interests revolved around the following main subjects: the (re)assessment of the significance of the Austro-Hungarian Compromise; the social, cultural and intellectual history of the *fin-de-siècle* period in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the idea of Central Europe in the past, present and future, both as 'reality' and as 'utopia'.

The Compromise between Austria and Hungary was a legal act that created the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy in 1867. Immediately after it had been concluded, a debate on its legacy began, and the polemics continued well into the twentieth century, with widely varying verdicts. Among these was the view that the Compromise itself was a positive development, in fact the embodiment of the 'realizable' demands of the principles of the 1848 revolution. Another view held that it was a mutually destructive arrangement

for both parties concerned, while according to a third the balance was negative because the Compromise made Hungarians believe that without the Habsburgs their very existence was impossible.[15] Marxist historiography of the 1950s and 1960s condemned the first, 'bourgeois' viewpoint; instead, it considered the act of 1867 the betrayal of the principles of 1848. Hanák undertook research on the basis of unexplored sources, introducing new economic and societal aspects which up to his time had remained underrepresented in these debates. The conclusion he reached was that the Compromise represented a realistic arrangement and that, despite many conflicts, the era following 1867 was one of economic and cultural development. This verdict emphasized the interdependence of the two compromising parties and the wider European context of the legal act. As such, it contradicted both Hungarian nationalist and conventional Austrian 'wisdom' on Hungary's place within the empire. The results of Hanák's research were published in German in the book *Ungarn in der Donaumonarchie* (1984). It was a sign of recognition of the strength of his interpretation that it significantly shaped the historical debate, not just in Hungary but also in Austria. There it contributed to the revision of an influential viewpoint represented by Erich Zöllner (1916–96). According to Zöllner, for Austria the Compromise was even more tragic than the defeat at Königgrätz, because it led to a permanent crisis and the loss of Austrian identity, and Hungarians created division in the hitherto unified Austrian Empire.[16]

Moreover, the emphasis on pragmatic solutions was characteristic not only of Hanák's argument on the Compromise, but also in his work, his academic conduct and the nature of his persona. With hindsight, such a way of trying to negotiate a *modus vivendi*, which was based on realizing the interdependence between the regime and its historians, may be judged in different ways, depending on circumstances. It may be condoned as a realistic attitude that seeks to bring out the best of the available opportunities, or it may be condemned as an attitude which is damaging to the historian's integrity and possibly to the quality of his work. Yet it is worth remembering once again that acting as an 'uncompromising persona' may involve much higher risks than usual under an authoritarian regime.

Hanák also employed the concept of compromise as a (self-justificatory) framework to describe the generational divides along political lines in the period immediately following World War II. He detected three distinct groups in this era. The first included those who wanted to take revenge for the atrocities they had suffered in the past and found terror an essential tool for the creation of the new world. The second category included the 'compromisers' who believed that revenge could not become the foundation for a new world. Finally there were those who formulated their ideas exclusively with reference to the future and did not relate to the past in

any form. Hanák identified himself as belonging to the second group but, then, he was compelled to grapple with the problem that he had taken part in repressive acts. In his autobiographical essay he made the following attempt to come to terms with this contradiction: '*We, the compromisers* did not thus belong to the group that sought revenge. But the party which we joined showed its fist to us, there was no way to remain non-committal, because that was seen as identical with lack of loyalty.'[17]

Lastly, the different incarnations of Hanák's persona over the course of five decades of a working life were characterized not only by transformations, but by compromises. In addition to the young scholar coming 'from below' and launching his career with great ideological zeal, it later included the marginalized intellectual. With the passing of time and the change of political circumstances that aspect of his persona gradually morphed into a very different incarnation: that of the public historian and even a school maker. Hanák's commitment to Marxism also changed over time, while his European outlook, the combination of an old-fashioned sense of patriotism with cosmopolitan values and the appreciation of the Central European intellectual heritage, appears to have accompanied his entire career.

Fin-de-siècle culture

Hanák's research stays at some of the most prominent universities – Columbia, Yale, Bielefeld – in the 1970s and 1980s enabled him to familiarize himself with research topics and methodologies that extended beyond the kind of history that was full of ideological ballast and revolved around 'fundamental turning points' from a Marxist perspective. In the course of those stays he discovered the *Annales* school and the history of everyday life. He also became inspired by the German proponents of new social history emerging in the 1970s, with particular emphasis on the problems relating to *embourgeoisement*, as explored by Jürgen Kocka and his colleagues. New currents in cultural history did not escape him either, and inspired essays from him on topics ranging from urban high culture to the culture of the bourgeoisie and the history of the operetta. All these intellectual encounters were refreshing for him because, in his own words, these methods represented a more 'human' history. Instead of focusing on power, they allowed him to focus on the people**.** They also allowed him to reveal to his more doctrinaire colleagues and readers that, contrary to some vulgar Marxist interpretations, history was never mono-causal.[18]

The greatest impact on Hanák's work was exercised by the historian Carl Schorske, whom he befriended during his stay at Princeton. Schorske was author of the magnificent *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture*, a

masterful collection of seven interdisciplinary essays which earned him the Pulitzer Prize in 1981. The book offered an analysis of political and intellectual life in the city. Focusing on prominent intellectuals and artists such as Sigmund Freud, Gustav Klimt, Oskar Kokoschka and Arnold Schönberg, it revealed that their innovations required a break with the nineteenth-century liberal tradition. The inspiration provided by Schorske and Hanák's own interest in modern cities and in the comparative method motivated him to study the dynamics of the competition between Vienna and Budapest in arts, architecture and politics. The outcome was, among other things, the essay collection *A kert és a műhely* (*The Garden and the Workshop)*, the English version of which was first published, with Schorske's foreword, shortly after Hanák passed away. In the book 'garden' stood as a metaphor for Vienna's aesthetic and individualistic culture, while 'workshop' stood for the busy, socially engaged and industrializing Budapest. While Hanák's book provided no equivalent to the coherence and consistence of Schorske's *tour de force* – one reviewer characterized it as a book 'more to enjoy than to study' – it was a worthy and lively contribution which discussed topics ranging from *embourgeoisement*, via urbanization and the history of the operetta, to death in Vienna and Budapest. If not in depth and coherence, in certain aspects the book did serve as a 'twin' to Schorske's *magnum opus*. In addition, the commonality of the chosen genre – the essay – what critiques described as Schorske's 'almost sentimental occupation with the Viennese center' was mimicked in Hanák's focus on Budapest. Moreover, the way Schorske somewhat idealized the image of German-Jewish cultural life which stood in marked contrast to the political sphere of the period could also be detected in Hanák's argument.[19]

It was also at this time that Hanák discovered his affinity with the intellectual generation of the *fin-de-siècle* period in Vienna and Budapest. He felt that their status on the margins of society, their falling out of public life, their existential solitude and anxiety were reverberating with his own experiences. Among those intellectuals he named in particular were Hugo von Hoffmanstahl, Béla Bartók, Robert Musil and Franz Kafka. As Hanák put it: 'I could relate to those, who could not identify themselves with anything but *l'art pour l'art*'.[20] Moreover, by positing himself as the successor to those marginalized and alienated intellectuals, Hanák also diagnosed his alienation from the Communist Party with reference to their experiences: 'I did not have a family of my own, the party became my family. Like George Lukács, Wittgenstein and Karl Kraus who got to experience the hollow nature of their own *grand bourgeois* life from within, its hypocritical nature and fake morals, I felt within my own "family" in the same way. But this alienation had to be kept secret, first even from ourselves.'[21]

This individual interest became more pronounced once it was possi-

ble to showcase that it institutionalized forms. One major event in this connection was a colloquium between Hungarian and American historians devoted to progressivism. As Carl Schorske noted, '[w]hile young American historians were preoccupied with the reanimation of the legacy of pre-Cold War progressivism and the New Deal in the conservative atmosphere of the Cold War, their Hungarian counterparts were reviving their own cosmopolitan and democratic intellectual tradition of the turn of the century'.[22] From the 1970s onwards, as the communist regime came to gradually soften, under carefully observed parameters it became possible to write about the progressive intellectual traditions of the *fin-de-siècle*, which represented an alternative to communist 'progressivism'. The members of the so-called civil radical group of *fin-de-siècle* Budapest had included Karl Mannheim, Karl Polányi and Oszkár Jászi who all had an avid interest in societal problems. Oszkár Jászi, to whose legacy Hanák dedicated a book, was an outstanding political and social analyst of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and a proponent of Danubian patriotism. In this book Hanák argued that, contrary to interwar accusations coming from the right wing of the political spectrum, the civic radical discourse was patriotic, but its focus of allegiance had been, not the ethno-nation, but an envisioned multiethnic and democratic cultural-political community.[23]

Although this civil-radical group remained marginalized, it was significant because during their careers its members exercised intellectual critique of conservative nationalist traditions and of communist ideology in equal measure.[24] It therefore perfectly suited Hanák's ideal which was likewise critical of the nationalist legacy, while increasingly distancing itself from the Marxist legacy. In addition to the intellectual and political culture, Hanák was thoroughly influenced by the literature of the era, and in particular by Robert Musil (1880–1938) and his magnificent, though unfinished, book *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*. This book documented the moral and intellectual decline of *Kakania* – a label Musil coined from the famous k. und k. (*kaiserlich und königlich*) attribute – an Empire which appeared to have got stuck in a 'not entirely committed to modernization, but not entirely backward' state. What Hanák appreciated most in Musil's writings, well before they had been discovered and even become fashionable in the circles of a wider reading public, was a special sense of absurdity and the ironic distance he kept from 'big history'.

The public intellectual

Some historians find it a paramount task to produce works intended for the general public, while others feel no affinity with such a mission. The

same applies for another, but not entirely unrelated type of engagement: participation in public life and contribution to political debates. In both cases, such involvement may be judged in different ways. It may be viewed as a virtue that allows the historian to descend from the ivory tower and/or act as a responsible citizen. Alternatively, it may be frowned upon because of the potentially necessary compromise on academic standards it might involve or for alleged political partisanship. In Central and Eastern Europe at the time Hanák was working, public and political involvement by historians was often regarded as the norm, rather than the exception, especially in terms of their contribution to the nation-building process. This influential view was first advanced by R. W. Seton-Watson in his inaugural lecture 'The historian as a political force in Central Europe' at the School of Slavonic Studies in 1922. According to Seton-Watson, current political miseries acted as an incentive to revive historical studies, enabling the present to be contrasted unfavourably with past glories. In Central and Eastern Europe the historical tradition was to play an 'absolutely decisive' part, even rescuing whole nations from oblivion.[25] The validity of Seton-Watson's thesis about historians' political engagement as a Central and East European *peculiarity* is highly questionable – it is enough to think of German historians' involvement in the debates around German unification, the political roles played by members of the French liberal school (Guizot, Thierry) or Thomas Macaulay's promotion of a Whig version of history in nineteenth-century Britain. However, this does not invalidate his point about the politicized context of historians' work in the region. In that context it is worth remembering that in an unfree state the contours between the 'professional' and the 'public' realms and the notion of the '(a)political' are not only elusive but also constantly evolving. Under certain conditions even 'silence', the *absence* of political commitment or withdrawal from the public may qualify as 'political', particularly when commitment is dictated by the authoritarian regime.

Throughout the mature stage of his career, Hanák consciously engaged with the public and thanks to his public appearances in the media he became a household name in Hungary. In performing that role, utilizing the intellectual capital that he had been accumulated, he often found himself in a position to articulate provocative ideas that were one step ahead of the officially accepted viewpoints. This in turn further increased the weight of his public performances in the unfree political sphere. It was not so much, therefore, the professional content of his message, but the 'productive tension' created in this way that made his popular performances notable. As his fellow *émigré* historian, István Deák, noted shortly after his death: if Hanák had been born in the United States or Western Europe, he would only be remembered by his historian colleagues. However, 'to

his fortune or misfortune', he was born into a small Central European city which predestined him to a life with tragic experiences, but also afforded him the chance to perform a role as a highly influential public intellectual.[26] Hanák was aware that not all members of the profession were appreciative of that role; from an elitist stance, some of them considered his participation in TV programmes as a 'light' and 'diluted' version of scholarship. In contrast, he believed it to be historians' and other intellectuals' task to take responsibility for shaping the consciousness of their community and he even dedicated a reflective essay to the subject.[27]

At the same time, he was sympathetic to some of his colleagues' reservations. In the field of history, the boundaries between the 'professional' and the 'amateur' scholar are not as precisely delineated as for example in the medical profession. The naive belief that history is first and foremost 'storytelling' and hence that everyone is an expert in history motivates some amateurs to fashion themselves as 'popular historians'. They express views that compromise the members of the historical profession who find themselves compelled to debunk some of the more illusory ones. For Hanák, the difference between these two categories had nothing to do with formal qualifications – a degree in history, experience in research. In his essay 'A történész lelkiismerete (On the historian's conscience)' (1995) he argued that the factor distinguishing the professional historian from the amateur is that the former's most important 'companion' is self-doubt, whereas the latter has difficulties separating the 'what happened' from the 'what should have happened', the *sein* from the *sollen*.[28]

Hanák also reflected on the intricate relationship between history writing and politics. He was aware that the discipline of history is often accused of being the servant of politics. Among numerous formulations he referred to Arthur Koestler, who characterized history (writing) in the image of an 'unscrupulous master builder' who constructs a building using mortar mixed from lies, blood and mud. He saw the greatest danger in the kind of history that assumed the function of national pedagogy. Rather than asking intellectually provoking and challenging questions, its representatives turned history into a static, legitimizing discipline, carefully guarding the national historical heritage, 'an untouchable' possession. According to Hanák, 'for the people of East-Central Europe, during the long centuries of dependence and subordination, the national heritage was evoked as consolation, and also as the legitimation of political demands yet to be made'.[29] The pathos which characterized the cult of anniversaries was the antithesis of critical public scholarship. It evolved from the tragic events of the past, the constant fight for survival. It was pious and judgemental, leaving space neither for alternative narratives, nor for doubt and humour. Hanák thus concluded that the historical

discipline was badly in the need of realistic and responsible rethinking of national issues.

While he was critical of these nationalist tendencies, he also understood their roots. One moment of revelation came when, in the early 1980s, he went to see a historical musical in New York. Its title was *1776* and it revolved around the dramatic moments of the war of independence and the American Declaration of Independence. The musical abounded in songs and dances, which were not at all of patriotic nature:

> For a while I was surprised as I asked myself what would be the reaction if a musical related the story of the Hungarian revolution of 1848, casting in the role of national heroes actors who are jumping, dancing and singing on the stage. Scandal! Our historical thinking does not tolerate music, dance or humour. But there is a big difference here: George Washington, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson died peacefully and after full lives. Our heroes of the revolution either died on the battlefield, or committed suicide or ended up in lifelong exile. Our relationship with history is different here, in the Danubian region.[30]

Lived reality and utopia: Central Europe

This 'different relationship' with history was at the core of Hanák's engagement with Central Europe. As we have seen, his civic patriotism was indebted to the *fin-de-siècle* legacy, but he detected its roots even further back: 'my personal utopia, that of Danubian patriotism, dates back to 1848'.[31] The revolutionary days of 1848 saw the 'marriage' of liberalism and nationalism, with demands including equality before the law, and freedom of expression and of religion. In aligning himself with the liberal tradition of 1848, Hanák was able to contest the belief that the cultivation of national consciousness (for example the heritage of the revolution) was the privilege of conservative, right-leaning scholarship. In addition, his engagement with the idea(l) of Central Europe was also part and parcel of a series of vibrant discussions that started in the early 1980s. These discussions conveyed an ideological message alongside others: they sought to distinguish the Central European satellite countries from the Soviet space. Contributors to these debates resided in various countries of the region and even in emigration. What connected them was a stance that can be described as 'critical patriotism': the search for an alternative to the ethno-nationalist tradition that was gaining increasing prominence in the final years of the Cold War.

The revival of the idea of Central Europe, buried during the Cold War, had promise to deliver a counter-narrative to the 'realized utopias' of the twentieth century. It also became Hanák's tangible utopia. Among the

numerous authors who engaged with the cultural and geopolitical aspects of the Central European dream (and reality) two writers' ideas became particularly resonant: those of the Czech Milan Kundera and the Polish *émigré*, Nobel-Prize-winner Czeslaw Milosz. Kundera's prominent essay 'The tragedy of Central Europe' insisted on Central Europe not as a 'state formation', but as culture or fate.[32] It pointed out that its borders were imaginary and constantly changing with the historical situation. At the core of Kundera's essay was the argument that Central Europe belonged to the realm of Western 'rationalism' and not to Eastern 'irrationalism'. Attractive as such a claim might have been, its proponent quickly fell under criticism for having perpetuated a false dichotomy. Another aspect of Kundera's ruminations about Central Europe that received critical reactions was their selective nature: anti-Semitism and Nazism were core experiences in the region but were not themes he chose to focus on. Interestingly, the same applies to Hanák's historical research: despite – or perhaps precisely because of – having experienced its impact on his own skin, he undertook no attempt to engage with the 'darker' shades of the intellectual legacy of the *fin-de-siècle*.

While appreciating Kundera's views on Central Europe, Hanák found that his own approach particularly resonated with Czeslaw Milosz's observations on the nature of literature in Central and Eastern Europe. According to Milosz:

> The most striking feature in Central European literature is its awareness of history, both as the past and the present... personae and characters who appear in these works live in a kind of time which is modulated in a different way than is the time of their Western counterparts: events of the political decade in which the characters live, of decades which formed and marked them, but also those of their parents' lifetime, constantly lurk in the background and add a dimension rarely met with in Western works. In the latter, time is neutral, colourless, weightless, it flows without zigzags, sudden curves and waterfalls. In the former, time is intense, spasmodic, indeed practically an active participant in the story. This is because time is associated with a danger threatening the existence of the national community to which a writer belongs.[33]

Hanák found Milosz's point applicable in a much broader context and that it was precisely this 'tangibility' of history in every aspect of life, the outcome of constant catastrophes endangering national existence, that constituted the core of a Central European mindset.[34] He also agreed with Milosz's claim that in this region 'imagination always comes from the collective memory and from a sense of menace'. Still, it was precisely these conditions that shaped its intellectual heritage and that made it attractive enough for Hanák to insist on an awareness of history. During the communist period, imagination provided a counter-narrative which

retained 'the dream'. In an essay written in 1984 Hanák asked the question '[w]hat would our brave new world be in 1984 without dreams and utopia?'[35]

A sign of Hanák's insistence on his utopia was that he continued to cherish it even in the 1990s, when it started to lose its intellectual currency and become a target of criticism.[36] He regretted that for many it became the new edition of the German *Mitteleuropa* plans or of anachronistic nostalgia for the lost empire, or even worse, revanchism. In an essay reflecting his debate with Eric Hobsbawm on this theme he pointed out that, just as it had been an obligatory pious gesture among Western intellectuals to lament the loss of Central Europe in the 1950s, then become enthusiastic about it in 1956 and in 1968, the intellectual fashion of the 1990s was to express disappointment with it. From this new vantage point it became the land of eternal troublemakers and of Kafkaesque castles. Reacting to Hobsbawm's claim that Central Europe was not a reality but a value judgement, and that it had more affinity with politics than with geography, Hanák asked: 'So what? Is perhaps the notion of the West devoid of any value judgement?'[37]

The many personae hiding in one historian

What predictable and what somewhat counter-intuitive observations can be made on the basis of Hanák's life-work and persona about existing categorizations, definitions and discussions of the subject? To what extent did the conditions under which he worked exercise an impact on his work or, to put it differently, which traits of his persona appear to be (more) fundamental to the historical profession and which ones appear to be peculiar to the situation in which he lived and worked? Could the limitations of an authoritarian system at times be inspirational, allowing the historian to make virtue out of necessity? To what extent can the role of 'nature', i.e. one's scholarly DNA, be influenced or even overwritten by 'nurture': one's own choices and intellectual development beyond the early scholarly stage?

As we have seen, Hanák negotiated various personae in the course of his long working life. He started his academic career as an overtly ambitious scholar who was at the same time a committed cadre of the Communist Party. To some extent his youthful persona appears to have shared certain similarities with some Italian and British Marxist historians of that period, such as Francesco Renda and Eric Hobsbawm. Nonetheless, in 'acting out' this persona, it did make a considerable difference that a 'young Marxist' in one of the western Iron Curtain countries did not enjoy the support

of the dominant regime, but formed part of a small academic subculture. In the period after the revolution of 1956 Hanák became a marginalized historian, who could nevertheless use the silence to which he was 'sentenced' for undertaking productive research in the secluded environment offered by the archives. Archival work is a quintessential constituent of a historian's profession, so the question may arise whether it makes sense to specify it as part of a distinct persona. However, in an authoritarian context, 'research in the archives' usually acquired a new connotation. Archives and libraries often served as 'refuges', as hiding places for scholars who had lost their positions at universities or had just been released from prison. At times, the notion of the archive also operated as a metaphor for professional research based on authentic and validated sources, which could be contrasted with the ideologically motivated, superficial kind of research undertaken by historians whose ideological commitment overwrote professional and ethical standards. Although not himself employed in the archives – he held a position in the Institute for History of the Hungarian Academy – during the late 1950s and early 1960s Hanák was able to relaunch his academic career as part of the 'archival subculture' of marginalized intellectuals. He succeeded in making virtue out of necessity in using this period to excavate hitherto unknown sources on which his reinterpretation of many Austro-Hungarian events became based.

The stain on Hanák's persona that derived from his malicious actions towards some of his 'bourgeois' colleagues forever disqualified him from acquiring the position of the 'heroic intellectual' (in the eyes of those who opposed the regime). Yet it gave him access to another possible persona: not the 'virtuous', but the 'fallible' historian with a 'human' face, who was not exempt from certain vices and who was trying to perform his work as effectively as possible in full knowledge that he had to observe certain 'rules of the game' if he hoped to see his work published. As we have seen, during the 1970s and 1980s, being able to draw on the intellectual capital that he accumulated as a respected and popular historian and a public intellectual, Hanák found himself able to afford the expression of critical and moderately provocative ideas that were one step ahead of the officially endorsed frameworks. As his popularity grew, and as students assembled around him in increasing numbers, he even found himself being considered a 'school-maker' and his open-mindedness and cosmopolitanism proved attractive for many members of the new generation. In addition to his charisma, there was something contagious about his enthusiasm for any of his subjects, and two decades after his death it is evident that he succeeded in transmitting many constituents of his scholarly DNA to the next generation of researchers, both in Hungary and beyond.

While the shades of Marxism were gradually fading in Hanák's work

and became reduced to occasional, obligatory lip service to the works of Marx and Engels, something appears to have remained an unalienable constituent of his persona, something in which he, 'the compromiser' knew no compromise: the effort to safeguard the national heritage against chauvinism by placing that heritage in a regional and European framework. This was the legacy and mission that he inherited from his intellectual role models, the Danubian patriots of the nineteenth century and the civic radicals of the *fin-de-siècle* period, and this was what he later transmitted to his students. Moreover, the importance of that mission was corroborated by his own, tragic, life experiences. In fact, often the divide between those Hungarian historians who eagerly pursued the 'discipline' of national pedagogy and those who warned against its dangers proved more decisive than the degree of their commitment (or lack thereof) to communist ideology. Moreover, this divide between the 'saving the nation from danger/extinction' stance and 'saving the nation from ethno-nationalist excesses' was replicated in the circles of *émigré* historians who had not fallen under the dictates of communist ideology and whose work was not subject to censorship. In that sense, Hanák's cosmopolitan persona showed similarities with that of another *émigré* historian I have mentioned, István Deák, even though Deák remained critical of Hanák's youthful, communist 'excesses'. This is not to say that reserving a distinct persona for *émigré* historians could not be meaningful. However**,** the physical distance and the freedom from the authoritarian regime were perhaps less important factors than could be presumed on the basis of common sense.

From the comfortable distance of mainstream scholarship, the historiographical production of the former 'Eastern bloc' may appear homogeneous, undistinctive and permeated with communist ideology to an extent that completely undermines professional quality. It may therefore seem somewhat counter-intuitive that communist and nationalist historiography were eminently compatible: from the 1970s nationalist–exclusivist populist rhetoric gained more and more influence in the historians' community and at times was even supported by the government. With hindsight, in the different incarnations of Hanák's persona, the significance of the communist context appears to be less decisive than one would expect. Rather, the lasting legacy of his persona, a message that he passed on to his students, was the need to critically engage with myopic nationalism and to find alternatives to it, even if one knows full well that those alternatives may forever remain in the realm of utopia.

Notes

1 Péter Hanák, 'Töredék fiaimnak', in Hanák, *Ragaszkodás az utópiához* (Budapest: Liget, 1993), p. 91.
2 Herman Paul, 'What is a scholarly persona? Ten theses on virtues, skills and desires', *History and Theory*, 53 (2014), 351.
3 Lorraine Daston and H. Otto Sibum, 'Introduction: scientific personae and their histories', *Science in Context*, 16 (2003), 2.
4 Ibid., 1.
5 István Deák, 'Hanák Péterről', *Budapesti Negyed*, 22 (1998), 7.
6 Hanák, 'Töredék fiaimnak', p. 37.
7 Ibid., 39.
8 'Szétszakadt nemzedék. Mihancsik Zsófia beszélgetése Hanák Péterrel', *Budapesti Negyed*, 22 (1998), 15.
9 Deák, 'Hanák Péterről', 8.
10 This is described in detail in Hanák, *Ragaszkodás*, pp 47–61.
11 'Szétszakadt nemzedék', 24.
12 Hanák, 'Töredék fiaimnak', p. 74.
13 Ibid., p. 88.
14 Hanák, 'Reálpolitika és utópia Közép-Európában', in *Ragaszkodás*, pp 224–5.
15 Péter Hanák, *1867 európai térben és időben* (Budapest: Historia, 2001), pp 175–7.
16 Ferench Glatz, 'Bevezetés', in Hanák, *1867 európai*, p. 9.
17 Hanák, 'Szétszakadt nemzedék', 15.
18 Hanák, 'Töredék fiaminak', p. 86.
19 Scott Spector, 'Marginalizations: politics and culture beyond *fin-de-siècle* Vienna', in Steven Beller (ed.), *Rethinking Vienna 1900* (New York: Berghahn, 2001), p. 136.
20 Hanák, 'Töredék fiaminak', p. 86.
21 'Szétszakadt nemzedék', 18.
22 Carl. E Schorske's foreword to the translation of Hanák's book *A kert és a műhely* (*The Garden and the Workshop)* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 10.
23 Péter Hanák, *Jászi Oszkár dunai patriotizmusa* (Osiris: Budapest, 1985).
24 György Litván, *Magyar gondolat, szabad gondola: Nacionalizmus és progresszió a század eleji Magyarországon* (Budapest: Magvető, 1978).
25 R. W. Seton-Watson, *The Historian as a Political Force in Central Europe* (London: School of Slavonic Studies at the University of London King's College, 1922), p. 27.
26 Deák, 'Hanák Péterről', 7.
27 Péter Hanák, 'Közép Európa: a bomlás alternatívája', in *Ragaszkodás az utópiához*, pp 291–2.
28 Péter Hanák, 'A történész lelkiismerete', and 'A történetírás: birtokper', *Budapesti Negyed*, 305, 294.
29 Péter Hanák, 'Reflexiók a századelő kultúrájáról', *Budapesti Negyed*, 234.
30 Hanák, 'A történetírás: birtokper', 296.
31 Péter Hanák, 'Ragaszkodás az utópiához', in *Ragaszkodás az utópiához*, p. 129.
32 Milan Kundera, 'The tragedy of central Europe', trans. Edmund White (from the French), *New York Review of Books*, 26 April 1984, 33–8.
33 Czeslaw Milosz, 'Central European attitudes', *Cross Currents: A Yearbook of Central European Culture*, 5 (1986), 101.
34 Hanák, 'Közép-Európa: a bomlás alternatívája', p. 297.
35 Ibid., p. 133.
36 Péter Hanák, 'Az alapítások kora', in *Ragaszkodás az utópiához*, p. 261.
37 Péter Hanák, 'Temetni veszélyes', in *Ragaszkodás az utópiához*, p. 280.