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There is nothing unusual in János Kornai's book. What is more, we could also say that it precisely fits into the lifework of this researcher-scholar economist. It is just that this time, the subject of research is János Kornai himself, rather than a component of the socialist social system, or its operation, or the exploration of an economic or social phenomenon. And instead of a dry, target-oriented style, Kornai writes this analysis in a subjective style that – from time to time – deviates from the subject, but aims at being unbiased and is spiced with humour.

The book is a thorough analysis of a human fate; that of a man who has gone through a lot over 77 years. He has gone through a war, the rebuilding of a country, a revolution, its suppression, a consolidation period and two changes of the social-economic system. These changes have, of course, not left unaffected this scientist's character and way of thinking. Today, with all the knowledge that we have, who would believe that János Kornai was a faithful communist in the early 1950's; János Kornai, who wrote „Economics of Shortage” and who, by a thorough exploration of how the socialist system operates, must have contributed to the erosion of the socialist system?

Yes. It is that man. The author of this book gives an in-depth analysis of János Kornai of the 50's. He gives a scientific analysis of what could possibly lead him to the communist party and its newspaper, Szabad Nép (Free People). Kornai does understand what he did at the time and why... The same happened to many people; thus, this story might even be considered typical. Later, however, out of shame for their former enthusiasm and blindness, many of these people attempted to diminish their own true devotions and ties to communism. Kornai refuses to do so. He still views himself with interest and surprise; his younger self, in the mind of whom faith and conviction defeated common sense and realistic thinking. In his new book, he describes this as follows: „The doors in my mind were not functioning properly at the time. More specifically, I closed up myself from experiences and ideas that could have shaken my belief. The defence and reductive mechanisms, well known from the theory of cognitive dissonance, started to work. These mechanisms include the suppression of information contradicting a deep belief, and self-convincing in order to maintain the original ideology and the consequent inner piece.”

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Today, Kornai says that he had lived through the early 1950's like a nightwalker, and only the increasingly often occurring shocking events shook him up from this nearly unconscious state of mind. From that point on, however, events started to accelerate. A minor revolt took place at Szabad Nép that led to defeat and humiliation, as well as the removal of many people. By that time, Kornai clearly saw that he would never want to be a journalist again, but a researcher, because research, and in-depth analysis are things that much better suit his character and area of interests.

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The reader might forgive me for quoting such long parts from the economist-researcher's young years, while they only make up a small proportion of the entire memoir, and they only represent a tiny station in János Kornai's path in life. What is more, he lived through this period well before the start of his scientific career. Regardless, reading the book, I found that those few years, spent, as he writes, as a night walking communist, determined his entire life. „At the beginning, the idea that I would never ever believe anyone anything without a reservation was no more than an instinct, later it has, however, become a conscious resolution that my first response to any intellectual or political statement would be to ask, whether it is true, or not. My first question will always be, whether the argument supporting any proposal or program is right, or wrong, and whether it is completely free from any perfidious intention.” Doubt and unbiased view have become determining features of Kornai's character as a researcher.

He presents his own life from this point of view. He looks at himself from the outside, although with clear sympathy and understanding, and he does accept that young man, the researcher, who was slowly finding his real self and who happened to have an orthodox period in his life. This period, however, never happened again; blind discipline has disappeared from his life for good, and what have remained are tolerance, comprehension for those who understand their own mistakes and sympathy with everyone.

After all this and a few-year-long interval, Kornai's career became connected to the Institute of Economics of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and later to many foreign universities and research institutes. Prominent examples for this were the economy research institute in Stockholm, where he wrote „Economics of Shortage”, and Harvard University in the United States, where he worked as a professor for nearly 20 years. The adventures and stories described in his book give a great picture of what an exciting and turbulent life the young Eastern-European scientist lived at Harvard.

Kornai's autobiographical book also reveals that despite the many negative experiences, the economist has remained optimistic. He also became disillusioned by some of the consequences of the political change and also he had a few naive ideas that inevitable led to disappointments. Regardless, he has experienced the change in the political system as an enormous accomplishment.

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I said there was nothing extraordinary in János Kornai's autobiographical book. But it is not entirely true. What is unusual is that this normally very reserved scholar now displays his genuine character. He reveals his own feelings. He could never afford it in an economics-related work. By revealing us his life, he contributes to our understanding of the last 70-80 years. He shows us what we only know from history textbooks. He shows how these things took place in the everyday life of a person, a scientist.

It is good to read this book. It is simple, easy to follow and human. It makes us think. And, if I may, it is also entertaining. It shapes our characters. It teaches us to be tolerant.