

True Love

Economist János Kornai has penned his memoir

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“My whole life’s work would lose its meaning if I were not convinced that thought has force, “ writes János Kornai, a renowned Hungarian professor of economics and a critic of socialism, in the introduction to his memoir which has been available in English since January 2007. Never striving for power or riches but devoting himself fully to the life of ideas, the soon-to-be-80-year-old professor emeritus at Harvard chose the title *By Force of Thought* (Durch die Macht der Gedanken) for his life story.

His remarkable life story reveals itself, indeed, as a love affair with thoughts and ideas. The reader gains an almost intimate insight into the intellectual creativity of a man for whom research has become a mission. The private life of Kornai, conversely, has been given only scant attention; Kornai only hints at the important role played by his second wife Zsuzsa, also an economist, who has been an irreplaceable conversation partner and an unbiased critic of his numerous books and papers. His three children and numerous grand-children also remain on the margins.

It is not his private life but the critical examination of his works and his scholarly and teaching activities which takes center stage. As a constant traveller between the East and the West, between Budapest and Harvard, Kornai offers more than just valuable insights into the difficult life of a deliberately apolitical intellectual behind the Iron Curtain surrounded by secret police spies.

Kornai also does not hesitate to point out the mistakes he had made in his early works. In addition to this, he shares his highly instructive observations of academic life at American and British top universities where, thanks to numerous invitations, he started feeling at home already in the mid 1960s.

Kornai was the first Eastern European who dared to criticise the everyday socialist command economy and to declare it incapable of being reformed. His reputation to this effect primarily rests on three books: his dissertation titled *Overcentralization; Economics of Shortage*; and on *The Socialist System* (which was published in 1992).

His thesis about the "soft budget constraint," the lack of fiscal discipline of the state-owned enterprises which leads directly to the socialist economy of scarcity, has survived the fall of the Iron Curtain and the Eastern-European economic transition. Today, the term comes up whenever scholars analyse the deficiencies of the health-care and educational systems in Western market economies. No wonder that after the collapse of socialism, Kornai concentrated and dealt critically with these "socialist" programs of Western capitalism.

Kornai has not always been a dedicated opponent of socialism and of the communist one-party governance. As a young Hungarian Jew who lost his father in a concentration camp, he perceived the Soviet Union not just as a liberator but he also became a dedicated Marxist and communist.

Only after his colleagues reported about the torture and the 40,000 political prisoners in the dungeons of the Hungarian secret service did he start to doubt. Deeply disappointed by the state-spun web of lies, Kornai left the Communist party in 1959 and decided to devote his life to research.

He also decided not to emigrate, even if this meant being constantly on alert, many years of self-censorship and a ban on teaching. Had he fled abroad, he would have admittedly lost his main research topic and would have never risen to become an influential interpreter of the socialist system in the West.

With the benefit of hindsight, Kornai says today that the subordination to the communist system against his conviction, and the numerous bans, were worth it. This was the only way he could obtain a travel permit and fulfill his wish to become, still under communist rule, an acknowledged member of the community of Western economists.

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