

János Kornai greets his colleagues at Harvard

celebrating his 90th birthday

January 11, 2018

Greetings from far-away Budapest! I feel very touched by the mere idea that you have gathered to celebrate my 90th birthday. This occasion brings up so many memories: I can hardly tell you how much it meant to me that I could spend almost two decades in the United States, and not just anywhere in the States but in one of the greatest academic centers of the world.

Until the turning point, until 1989-1990, I was one of the few members of the Eastern European intelligentsia who could travel to the West from time to time. Even before I obtained tenure at Harvard, I had taught at excellent European and American universities for shorter or longer periods. Still, it was immensely enriching for me to have the chance to commute regularly between Budapest and Cambridge, Massachusetts from 1984 to 2002, in other words, to spend half of my time in America. Now I really had an insight into what a living democracy means. And it was not only when I read books that I grasped it: understanding also came as, together with my wife Zsuzsa, I watched the Watergate Scandal unfold on screen. Today these experiences are especially precious to me, when here in Hungary the current regime calls itself a democracy, while it systematically abolishes the most important fundamental institutions of democracy. My experience in America set the standards for the development of my present views.

My almost two decades of experience in America taught me what university autonomy and academic freedom really mean. I still stand by these values, and now I find they are badly needed. Recently the time came to appoint a new rector (in America that would be a president) for a distinguished Hungarian university. The university senate looked for a suitable nominee, and found one. However, disregarding the university's choice, the government minister responsible for higher education appointed somebody else – following his own judgment. And he was able to do this because the law on higher education, altered in the spirit of autocracy, gave him the right.

At Harvard, I was impressed by the meetings of the department's senior members, and by the professional care as they considered every new professor's appointment. I was impressed, not least because I was able to compare all this with the selection procedures of Hungarian universities at that time. I make the same comparison also today. Back then, selection was crude, did not check carefully the qualification of the candidates, and was strongly influenced by political considerations. Regretfully, these anomalies still prevail in many universities and many schools and departments.

Even in the course of this friendly greeting, I do not wish to give the impression that my time in America was filled only with favorable experiences. As a tourist, I would have seen only America's natural beauties, its famous buildings and its fantastically rich museums. But I lived there and with my own eyes or through my readings I perceived the misery of millions of people, and the outrageous social inequality. I could read and listen to misleading declarations of politicians; I encountered ugly cases of corruption and violence.

Nor am I left with only happy memories of the world of the university. I accepted my Harvard appointment on condition that I would spend half my time in Hungary, engaged in Hungarian academic and public life. I did not emigrate to the USA, although I was offered the opportunity. I would have wanted – and up to a point I was able – to act as bridge between Eastern European and Western academic life. More than once I was saddened by the lack of serious interest on the side of a large part of our colleagues towards the great transformation of the former communist world. What is more, there were some who specifically disapproved of my frequent absences from campus, when I went away instead of taking on my share of the more mundane tasks of university life, committee work and long meetings – as other people did.

But enough of this. I realize that I have been reciting the complaints to those who are the most innocent of these failings. To those who have stood by my side, and who expressed strong interest in my experiences. I remember friends who are no longer with us: Abe and Rita Bergson, Frank and Mathilda Holzman, Bobby Solow, Bob and Nancy Dorfman and my dear assistant, Madeline LeVasseur. I think back to the many fascinating conversations among colleagues and spouses in each other's homes, including the meetings with our best friends who are here today. I remember the interesting topics we discussed, the fine meals we shared, and the evenings we spent together in Boston's Symphony Hall and Jordan Hall.

Thank you for gathering on this occasion. I look forward to enjoying the video-recording of your words to me. It is natural for a man to look back over his long history on his 90th birthday. In this long film, the time I spent in the USA at Harvard counts as one of the most memorable, most exciting and intellectually most enriching episodes. It is a rare and special pleasure to know that I formed real, selfless and lasting friendships with people to whom I am still faithfully attached, who I still respect and still love.