

LENGYEL, Joseph

Banned in Hungary

By Phillip Sawicki

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It was Albert Camus who explained that the true revolutionary can never be satisfied, not even by the revolution. The true revolutionary is an idealist who belatedly understands that his revolution (like all the others) simply marked the transition from one ruling class to another, that the brotherhood of man remains as distant as ever.

Such a revolutionary is Endre Lassu, the central figure in this overly-talkative and overtly polemical novel, who turns up one day in the mid-1950s at the Hungarian Embassy in Moscow, much to the chagrin of his old comrade Istvan Banicza.

IN THE PERIOD following the first World War Lassu and Banicza had both been young communists dedicated to a revolution in Hungary. There was a

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short-lived revolt, after which Lassu fled to the Soviet Union, a grave mistake. As he remarks, the Stalinist courts judged him by the axiom that "he who once dared lift his hand against any authority can be expected to dare to do so again." By the time of the novel Lassu has been restricted to the dismal outskirts of Moscow after spending 18 years in Siberia.

Banicza, on the other hand, stayed in Hungary after the abortive up-rising and eventually was imprisoned by the Nazis. After the war and the permanent Communist rise to power he became a party functionary. Now chief deputy to the Hungarian ambassador, Banicza is one of those normally ambitious people who opt for power and responsibility. Still, he's delighted at first to see his old comrade. He has always admired Endre Lassu.

CONFRONTATION. By Jozsef Lengyel.
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Hungarian communists, went wrong. The meeting ends with the two old comrades no longer.

Later the same day Banicza discovers he is to become the Hungarian ambassador to England. He attends a reception with his socially impeccable wife (who prefers separate bedrooms) and afterwards in his study ponders suicide. Lassu has got under his skin. Meanwhile, Lassu returns to his mistress, and gloomily they both realize they may never get back to Hungary alive.

THERE THE book ends, having covered a lot of ground chronologically but not having got very far as a novel. For Jozsef Lengyel, whose own experiences closely parallel those of Lassu, is primarily interested in using his characters to present dialectical arguments, either in direct conversation or in stream-of-consciousness musings.

The book is politically trenchant enough to have been banned in Hungary and, presumably, all the other east European countries. That's not hard to understand, given the rigid sensibilities of most communist leaders. But Lengyel doesn't say much about the communist system that hasn't been said more effectively elsewhere, most notably in Orwell's "Animal Farm," Djilas's "The New Class," and in a once-famous volume of ex-communist disenchantment, "The God That Failed."

Conflicts between persons of conscience and the centralized bureaucracies of the supposedly classless states have, of course, been the raw stuff of a great many novels. In the last decade Solzhenitsyn has shown that the material is far from exhausted.

But Lengyel's novel, adequately translated by Anna Novotny, is static. The tension between the characters is intellectual, not emotional, and one is reminded more of a Socratic dialogue than of a novel by, say, Dostoyevsky. Or even Philip Roth. Lengyel's failure to make his conflicts convincingly dramatic is another proof that memories and ideas, however passionate, do not of themselves make a novel.

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Lassu is taking a great risk by sneaking into the heart of Moscow, ostensibly to gain Banicza's help in getting back to Hungary. But even more than repatriation, Lassu wants to confront Banicza with the political crimes and failures of the communist leaders in the Soviet Union and his homeland. What begins as a grand reunion between two middle-aged men turns into a verbal battle over what Lenin said and what Stalin did and where Bela Kun, the leader of the early