

**Letter From Budapest**

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# Change in Hungary: Kadar Is Satirized

**BUDAPEST**

By local standards it was a sensational event. Just after half of Hungary's population had settled down before their television sets to watch the New Year's Eve show, a comedian started imitating the man whose voice, manners and style are known to virtually all Hungarians—Janos Kadar, the Communist Party leader.

The unannounced comedy routine was so unexpected that an ominous silence fell over the television studio audience. Suddenly a microphone in the back of the auditorium picked up the voice of an old lady, filled with apprehension, as she uttered, "Jesus Christ."

The comedian, totally unruffled, stepped out of his role and, looking at the old lady, said: "No, no. You've got the right floor but the wrong department."

This broke the ice and the audience roared with laughter as the comedian, Geza Hofi, continued gently to satirize Hungary's leader by using Kadar's penchant for chess to mock his political pragmatism. ("You've got to sacrifice a couple of pawns to get the queen.")

The show was a great hit and it was rebroadcast recently. That Hofa could satirize the Communist Party leader—even with a good deal of ambiguity—over the state-operated television network is an unprecedented event in Communist Europe. Obviously, it was staged with the approval of Hungary's highest party authorities.

Normally, Communist Party chiefs are treated as deities in the party-controlled media. Even in nonaligned Yugoslavia, with its more relaxed cultural climate, no one would dream of satirizing President Tito. And Romania's President Nicolae Ceausescu enjoys the grandeur and glamor of an emperor in his country's media.

In Hungary, however, significant changes have been taking place—changes in style if not in substance. A few days after the show, the Budapest newspaper Esti Hirlap broke another unwritten rule of the Communist press when it carried a front page cartoon of Kadar. Its caption was to the effect: "I also got a kick out of it (the TV show)."

The 62-year-old Kadar has managed to enhance his reputation and win a degree of public affection by pursuing policies aimed at domestic independence.

The passage of time has blurred the stigma once attached to his role in 1956, when Soviet tanks crushed the Hungarian rebellion and installed him as first secretary of the Hungarian Communist Party.

Over the past decade, Kadar has gradually relaxed cultural policies, phased out the rigidly ideological approach to the economy and cautiously switched over to market-oriented policies. As a result, Hungary's standard of living has been rising.

Indeed, most Hungarians seem comfortable with Kadar and the unexpected TV spoof was interpreted by them as a sign that Kadar is comfortably secure in his pre-eminent position. With a party congress coming up in March, the people had worried about possible personnel changes.

The hint that Kadar will continue in his present post is regarded as a positive development.

The relatively relaxed cultural atmosphere includes a good deal of stinging criti-

cism. One is even permitted to poke fun at Hungary's subservient role in the Soviet bloc—although not at the Russians directly.

One cabaret, Vidam Szimpad, has the following comedy routine in its show: A young Hungarian journalist excitedly approaches his managing editor shouting, "There's been a coup in Ruritania. How should we play the story?"

The editor suggests that the young man call the Hungarian Foreign Ministry for guidance. As he rushes to the telephone, an office secretary stops him saying, "Save yourself the trouble, just check the Tass wire" (the official Soviet news agency).

HUNGARY'S CULTURAL climate, though relaxed in comparison to that of some other Soviet bloc countries, is carefully supervised by the regime. And authorities are ready to crack down on offenders.

Artists and writers are not supposed to criticize the Soviet Union, or challenge Hungary's socialist system, or produce works that authorities regard as pornographic.

"Those are the sacred cows, you cannot touch," said one Hungarian artist. "The rest is okay."

By and large, the intellectual community is said to have accepted these rules. When problems occur, however, authorities are ready to move against offenders as they did in the case of a group of left-wing intellectuals last fall.

The internationally known writer Georgy Konrad and sociologist Ivan Szelenyi



were arrested and held for five days on charges of having engaged in "subversive activities." Their crime was producing a critique of the regime's cultural policies and their corruptive influence on writers and artists. A relatively unknown poet also was arrested for having read the offending manuscript.

According to a Western diplomat, there was little support for the three men in the intellectual community.

"The consensus was that Konrad and Szelenyi had strayed from the rules of the game. And most intellectuals have a vested interest in preserving these unwritten rules because they fear any changes could only be for the worse," the diplomat added.

But even in this incident, according to well-informed Hungarians, the authorities went out of their way to be "gentle and reasonable, to compromise and conciliate." The three men were told that their kind of manuscript would not be tolerated in Hungary but that if they wanted to continue activities along the same lines they would be given passports to go to the West.

At the same time, they were urged to remain in Hungary and told that the regime would make sure that opportunities here remain open for them. Both Konrad and Szelenyi apparently decided to accept the regime's offer. It was announced recently that Konrad has signed a contract for a new novel with a Hungarian publisher.

ONE OF THE most curious byproducts of last year's "gold rush" in the United States was a \$50 million deal involving Hungary's national bank.

With gold prices soaring on the world markets and the Americans unable to buy gold bullion in 1974, the demand for old gold coins rose sharply in the United States. The Hungarian bank, following a capitalist instinct for making a quick buck, saw in this situation a golden opportunity.

Since the value of gold coins greatly exceeds the actual amount of gold they contain, the Hungarians took a sizable amount of gold and minted pre-World War I Hungarian coins early last year.

The freshly minted "old" coins were sold through a Swiss intermediary to American coin dealers. The exact amount could not be learned here, since the whole episode is treated as a state secret.

But reliable American sources said the total deal involved about \$50 million with the Hungarians making a profit of well over \$10 million.

—Dusko Doder