

Three Glorious Resumptions: Kassák's Road to Becoming a Master

ANDRÁS KAPPANYOS

Abstract: Although the Hungarian Avant-garde produced several outstanding and internationally renowned creative minds, its defining figure is undoubtedly Lajos Kassák, poet, novelist, editor, critic, curator, typographer, painter, but first and foremost tireless and incorruptible organizer. His unprecedented career is more than just an amusing story: it also exemplifies the changes of the times that made it possible for a very sharp and very stubborn young man to accomplish this journey from apprentice of a locksmith in a small rural town to respected member of the community of progressive European artists. The presentation examines the major stages of this journey in the socio-cultural context and in the intellectual-spiritual development of Kassák. It focuses on the turning points when his surprisingly independent thinking allowed such insights and decisions that heavily influenced the destiny of Central-European Avant-garde, and still affect our ideas on the ultimate aim of art.

As the organizer of this conference, I felt it was my duty to fill in the greatest gap these wonderful presentations have left open, and devote a full paper to Lajos Kassák, the undisputed leading figure of the Hungarian Avant-garde movement, also known as Activism. But it isn't just a lap of honor. Kassák's extraordinary career is a unique example of how the two core ideas of modernity, *mobility* and *autonomy*, define the life of an individual and a movement. Kassák became a modern artist of international prestige at about the age of 35 – that is a remarkable achievement, but far from being unique. What makes Kassák's career rather rare is that he turned a *modern* individual be-

fore becoming either an *artist* or, even later, *international*. The paper presents these three steps of his development in relation to his three formative journeys.

Kassák was the first-born son of a pharmacy assistant and an illiterate washerwoman in the rural town of Érsekújvár, Northern Hungary, today Nové Zámky, Slovakia. His father's ambition was to make his son a "gentleman": presumably an official or clerk at some governmental institution, but even priesthood was considered. Kassák's first act of rebellion took place at the age of 12, when the bright youngster refused to continue middle school: he deliberately failed in all subjects and took an apprentice's job at a locksmith's workshop. Clearly, at the time, it wasn't part of a conscious life plan: it was an act of instinctive, juvenile revolt. Nevertheless, it fits very consequently among his later decisions. On the surface, this might appear as a step down in the social hierarchy: to choose a proletarian way of life instead that of the lower middle class. But Kassák saw very clearly (even if not consciously) that the perspectives promoted by his father were distinctively pre-modern, belonged to the 19th century. At the time, he presumably perceived this only as a premonition of unbearable dullness. On the other hand, being a confident member of the proletariat could mean immediate contact with progress, at least in its technological sense. Being an ironworker might have seemed an open-ended story, and later it proved to be one.

The second phase of the first step of this self-modernization process came five years later, when Kassák, armed with his new vocational certificate, moved to Budapest. The capital was a modern metropolis (again, at

least in the technological sense), with the first subway on the continent, among other wonders. The millennial celebrations and exhibitions of 1896 inspired many young people of Kassák's generation in spite of their ideological and aesthetic conservatism. These events were devised to promote the thousand-year continuity of the Hungarian state as well as its economic strength – but it also promoted modernity, the realm of open-ended stories, and inspired actual mobility, as in the case of Kassák.

The cruel efficiency of modern life opened the young ironworker's eyes to social injustice that was much more visible in the urban environment. He soon became a socialist and a trade unionist and began to read passionately. This finalized his break with the world of his father, and started the second period of his development, during which he became an artist. First, he tried his hand at poetry. His first idols, predictably, were pre-modern poets, namely Sándor Petőfi, the much plagiarized romantic-patriotic hero poet of the 1848 revolution, and a contemporary, the rather mediocre socialist poet, Sándor Csizmadia. The choices of the young Kassák, as is typical of untrained readers, were thematically based. But his readings triggered new expectations in his mind, and he gradually realized that modern subjects would require modern forms. This instinctive search brought him to the point where, in 1909, at the age of 22, he started on his second journey: he went on a study tour to Paris to see the modern world and learn what is there to be learned. As he writes in his autobiography, "I started off the second time to fulfill my life."¹ The first time, he implies, was his moving to Budapest. That time, five years earlier, he made a typical journey of a young, dissatisfied craftsman; this time that of a young, restless artist. His most im-

¹ „Másodszor indultam útra, hogy életemet kiteljesítsem.” KASSÁK Lajos, *Egy ember élete* [A Man's Life], 2 kötet. (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1983), 1:299.

portant role model was his older contemporary, Endre Ady, the leading figure of Hungarian literary modernism. But unlike Ady, Kassák's poverty wasn't an artistic pose; he was really penniless, and covered most of the distance by foot, relying on the compassion of people, sometimes on actual begging.

We cannot be sure how much he could actually learn about modernity, but he definitely learnt a lot about the richness of European culture: as he writes in his 1922 narrative poem, this journey irreversibly made him a poet.² Returning to Budapest he gradually established himself as an independent writer. He wrote short stories, novels and plays, he was accepted even by the leading moderate-modernist review, *Nyugat*. His prose works weren't distinctly avant-garde, as the first core groups of the European avant-garde were just forming this time. His writing was predominantly naturalistic, with a distinct expressionist tinge in his language. But he already followed the European developments very closely, like the first manifestations of Futurism and Expressionism.

As with so many avant-garde artists, it was the war that brought about his aesthetic radicalism – as the vehicle of a radical political reaction to the monstrosities of the war. The Hungarian population, even the working class, received the war rather enthusiastically: it was a general illusion that it will bring social justice and prosperity. Kassák and Ady were among the very few intellectuals who opposed the war almost from the beginning. In 1915 Kassák published his first poetry volume,³ which was also his first avant-garde

² „[M]ert akkor már költő voltam megoperálhatatlanul” ([B]ecause I was already a poet then, inoperably). KASSÁK Lajos, *Összes versei*, 2 kötet. (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1981), 1:206. Another version: „Már költő voltam megválthatatlanul” (I was already a poet, irredeemably). KASSÁK, *Egy ember élete*, 1:425.

³ KASSÁK Lajos, *Eposz Wagner maszkjában* (Budapest: Hunnia nyomda, 1915).

statement, and in November he started his first periodical, *A Tett* [The Deed], with a distinct antiwar focus. In the summer of 1916, with almost prophetic foresight, he published an international issue that included contributions from several warring nations, both allies and enemies. The strength of this gesture is shown in the reaction to it, as the review was banned by a decree of the Ministry of Interior. (In a posthumous volume, Kassák includes the text of this banning decree.⁴) Apparently, they understood this as Kassák meant it: a declaration that the bonds between progressive, creative people everywhere are stronger than fleeting political interests. What Kassák didn't know was that only a few months earlier, in neutral Zurich, Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara and others founded Dadaism, the first international movement of the century.

Kassák quickly started his new periodical, *MA*, and for the next decade this became the foremost institution of the Hungarian avant-garde, that developed into a review of international impact, and an important inspiration to the whole of Eastern and Central Europe. But before reaching this prominence, the undertaking had to face some difficult challenges. In 1917, under the spell of the events in Russia, four leading collaborators left the periodical because Kassák didn't agree to their demands for an openly Bolshevik revolutionary stance. Kassák was very much involved, and even published a special issue on Lenin, but he wanted to keep *MA* a *cultural* review. The youngest of the four deserters, József Révai (the others were Máttyás György, Aladár Komját and József Lengyel), became a member of another, much more sinister quartet three decades later: he became the omnipotent tyrant of Hungarian cultural politics of the Stalinist regime of the fifties (his peers were Mátyás Rákosi, Ernő Gerő and Mihály Farkas). He caused a lot of

damage in this position but he did try to save his former master from atrocities.

But to get back to our main story, the worldviews of the two of them had to collide once again much earlier. During the short lived 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic, Révai became an editor of the party journal, and in this position he prepared a decree to make *MA* the official literary journal of the Republic. Kassák firmly declined this honor,⁵ which testifies to his surprising insight, or even foresight. Though he agreed with the general direction of the revolution and even had an office in the Commissariat of Public Education (as a censor of posters), he wanted to preserve the autonomy of his periodical. This preserved autonomy was the token of the authenticity that kept *MA* alive for the coming six years of exile.

During the months of the Soviet Republic, in May and June of 1919, the issues of *MA* doubled in bulk and sported a heading printed in red, but the leaders of the revolution apparently didn't forget Kassák's refusal. Béla Kun attacked the periodical in one of his speeches to which Kassák responded with an open letter.⁶ *MA* wasn't officially banned but the once abundant paper supplies were suddenly exhausted: the story of the review ended in Budapest, to resume, in a year's time, in Vienna.

The flight to Vienna, Kassák's third definitive journey, was involuntary, but it was probably an even bigger social-cultural leap than the previous two. In a relatively short time Kassák became an honored member of the international community of progressive artists. He corresponded with Schwitters, Arp, Tzara, van Doesburg, Hausmann, Archipenko, Puni, and many others: published their writings in translation and their visual works in reproduction, and advertised their

⁵ KASSÁK, *Egy ember élete*, 2:519–520.

⁶ KASSÁK Lajos, „Levél Kun Bélához a művészet ügyében” [Letter to Béla Kun in the name of art], *MA* 4, 7. sz. (1919): 146–148.

⁴ KASSÁK Lajos, *Az izmusok története* (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1972), 197.

journals as they advertised his. Of course, there had been Hungarian artists in the past who achieved international prominence: Ferenc Liszt was a real world-celebrity in his time, as well as Mihály Munkácsy, to a somewhat lesser extent. But being admitted in the not-so-secret international society of artists and thinkers was something different: the closest analogy is probably the great Hungarian humanist poet of the 15th century, Janus Pannonius, who corresponded somewhat similarly with his peers above the heads of their earth-bound, medieval contemporaries.

However, for Kassák, this implied elitism was foreign, as he felt a strong vocation for the elevation of the masses. He wanted to achieve a broad impact, even internationally, and realized that his main medium, language, was a hindrance. From 1920 on, he began to experiment in visual arts: first with typography, and visual poetry, then collages and linocuts, and shortly with oil paintings. He made *MA* one of the most spectacular magazines of its time, so that it would be attractive even for those readers who didn't read Hungarian. "I think ours is one of the most attractive periodicals in Europe", he wrote in a letter in 1921.⁷ Each issue became a strong visual statement, and the number of writings on visual arts, architecture, theatre and film increased significantly – not at the expense of literature, but that of politics. This shift of emphasis led to a new, bitter split in the editorial board: in 1922 both deputy editors Sándor Barta and Béla Uitz left Kassák, in spite of the fact that both of them were his brothers-in-law (husbands of his two younger sisters). This crisis brought about Kassák's most important poetical work, the long narrative poem, *The Horse Dies the Birds Fly Off*, as well as one of his

⁷ ILLÉS Ilona, szerk., *A Tett, Ma, 2x2 repertorium* (Budapest: Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum, 1975), 17.

most important essays, *Answer to Many Inquiries and Standpoint*.⁸

In this critical situation, we can once again ascertain his acumen. The famous, enigmatic closing line of the poem, "and the nickel samovar flies away above our head" ("s fejünk fölött elrepül a nikkell számovár"),⁹ spectacularly coincides with a sentence of the essay: "As we see, the possibility of a world-revolution, prepared by the war, has swept over us unfulfilled, due to the moral constraints and immature demands of the proletariat, and we fell back again in a preparatory phase."¹⁰ Kassák clearly realized that the imminence of a world-revolution is an illusion; a responsible activist artist should find new ways to fulfill his mission. Contrary to his collaborators, among them his brothers-in-law, Kassák realized that the program of directly revolutionizing people would imply the subordination of art to politics, the abandoning of the autonomy of art. I could find no evidence that he would have explicitly followed this line of thought, that degrading art to a device of political persuasion degrades its recipients as well, damaging their autonomy. Nevertheless, he acted as someone who fully realized this.

Kassák had to face the dilemma of many progressive, committed artists of the century, and he found his own way out of it. From the early, predominantly Expressionist concepts he led the movement to its mature, predominantly Constructivist era, through a short and stormy Dadaist period. He realized that art shouldn't be used as a device that is supposed to directly change people's convictions. Art either shouldn't be used as a device at all, or it should be used for changing people's environments: the spaces they live and work in, the views they see, the objects they interact with. These elements of human environment should be purely functional and

⁸ KASSÁK Lajos, „Válasz sokfelé és álláspont”, *Ma* 8, 8. sz. (1922): 50–54.

⁹ KASSÁK, *Összes versei*, 1:215.

¹⁰ KASSÁK, „Válasz sokfelé...”, 52.

beautiful in their functionality. Kassák, through his own personal reasoning, arrived at the conclusion of Bauhaus – and admittedly, this insight wasn't independent from his closest collaborator at the time, László Moholy-Nagy, who was soon to become a professor of Bauhaus in Weimar. One of the fruits of this cooperation is *Buch neuer Künstler*.¹¹

Kassák became an international modern artist on his own, and he performed three social-cultural leaps which typically only occur once in a generation, at most. At the age of 37 he began to write his autobiography which spans eight volumes but only reaches the age of 33. Were there more possible steps?

In 1926 Kassák returned to Budapest and in several gestures offered a new synthesis to the Hungarian public—a synthesis that involved the innovations of the avant-garde attuned to Hungarian cultural traditions. This offer consisted of his portfolio-like volume, *Tisztaság könyve* [Book of Purity],¹² and his new periodical, *Dokumentum* (1926–27). The Hungarian public – which had no experience with the avant-garde – ultimately refused this offer. But Kassák's personal intuition, that understanding through art is more universal than understanding through politics, provided substance for the second forty years of his life, and liberated several generations of artists.

Bibliography

- ACZÉL Géza. *Kassák Lajos*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1999.
- BORI Imre és KÖRNER Éva. *Kassák irodalma és festészete*. Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1967.
- ILLES Ilona, szerk. *A Tett, Ma, 2×2 re-pertórium*. Budapest: Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum, 1975.
- KASSÁK Lajos. *Eposz Wagner maszkjában*. Budapest: Hunnia nyomda, 1915.
- KASSÁK Lajos. „Levél Kun Bélához a művészet ügyében”. *MA* 4, 7. sz. (1919): 146–148.
- KASSÁK Lajos. „Válasz sokfelé és álláspont”. *Ma* 8, 8. sz. (1922): 50–54.
- KASSÁK Lajos. *Tisztaság könyve*. Wien: Horizont–Fisher Verlag, 1926; see also facsimile edition: Budapest: Helikon Kiadó, 1987.
- KASSÁK Lajos. *Az izmusok története*. Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1972.
- KASSÁK Lajos. *Összes versei*. 2 köt. Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1981.
- KASSÁK Lajos. *Egy ember élete*. 2 köt. Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1983.
- MOHOLY-NAGY László und KASSÁK Lajos, Hg. *Buch neuer Künstler*. Wien: Ma, 1922; see also facsimile edition: Zürich: Lars Müller, 1996.
- SZABÓ Júlia. *A magyar aktivizmus története*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1971.

¹¹ MOHOLY-NAGY László und KASSÁK Lajos, Hg., *Buch neuer Künstler* (Wien: Ma, 1922); see also facsimile edition: (Zürich: Lars Müller, 1996).

¹² KASSÁK Lajos, *Tisztaság könyve* (Wien: Horizont–Fisher Verlag), 1926; see also facsimile edition: (Budapest: Helikon Kiadó, 1987).