Central Europe in Manhattan: Why Hungarian dissidents mattered to New York intellectuals

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RESÜMEE

Mitteleuropa mitten in Manhattan. Warum sich New Yorker Intellektuelle für ungarische Dissidenten interessierten

Seit Ende der 1970er Jahre erhielten immer mehr osteuropäische, besonders ungarische Oppositionelle Stipendien für mehrmonatige Aufenthalte in New York City. Dieser Essay erforscht die Hintergründe für das Interesse amerikanischer Intellektueller an den Dissidenten aus Osteuropa. Die Analyse konzentriert sich auf die Fellows des *Institute for the Humanities* an der New York University, die ebenfalls zu den Kreisen um die *New York Review of Books* und die 1978 gegründete *U.S. Helsinki Watch Group* gehörten. Als diese Intellektuellen György Konrád persönlich kennen lernen, beginnt ein regelmässiger Austausch zwischen New York und Budapest. Auf der einen Seite bedeutet die internationale Solidarität für die Osteuropäer Stipendien, Veröffentlichungsmöglichkeiten und Schutz vor den heimischen Regimen. Auf der anderen Seite bestätigt sie die Wiederbelebung des klassischen liberalen – nicht neokonservativen – Antikommunismus zur Zeit der Präsidentschaft Reagans in den USA. Darüberhinaus erlaubt es die Freundschaft mit Gleichgesinnten hinter dem Eisernen Vorhang den New Yorkern, nicht nur ihre ästhetische Vorliebe für das *fin-de-siècle* auszuleben, sondern auch ihre eigenen Wurzeln als Kinder osteuropäischer, oft jüdischer Immigranten wiederzuentdecken.

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1. Introduction

In the mid-1970s, the sociologist Richard Sennett contended that "New York is a center for artists, diplomats, publishers, journalists, college professors, and writers [but] this very diversity has created a problem. It is a problem of fragmentation."[1] He believed that the city's social, economic, and professional disintegration reflected a nationwide trend. The Watergate Scandal, the Yom Kippur War between Israel and its neighbors in 1973, the ensuing oil crisis and the concomitant economic recession, the withdrawal from Vietnam and the Iranian hostage crisis in 1979 reflect the general sense of 'malaise' and uncertainty of the age.[2] To overcome the perceived *cultural* stagnation, a group of intellectuals around Sennett founded the Institute for the Humanities at New York University in 1976. Although the Institute was close to shutting down due to financial strains in 1980, three years later, it was not only able to boast an impressive number of about 50 fellows but also an annual budget of $270,000. One of the main reasons for this spectacular recovery was the sudden interest in Central Europe and Hungarian dissidents.

This paper explores the intellectual history of New York before 1976 in order to analyze the motivations and goals of scholars, publishers and writers at the NYU Institute for the Humanities who sought to revitalize the city's intellectual milieu. Two main arguments are put forth: first, by the 1970s, a new generation of scholars and writers emerged that had grown disenchanted with those commonly identified as 'New York intellectuals.' By the 1960s, the latter, originally the creators of classic liberal anti-Communism, were morphing into influential neo-conservatives. Alienated, a younger group of thinkers and activists sought to recapture the essence of liberal anti-Communism while taking a critical stance towards the U.S. administration. To that end, they founded the *New York Review of Books* and the Institute for the Humanities.

Second, the analysis reveals how, around 1980, the New Yorkers discovered like-minded thinkers behind the Iron Curtain. The solidarity with East European dissidents lent credibility to their claim to liberal anti-Communism in the years of the neoconservative Reagan administration. It also convinced them of the significance of fin-de-siècle Central Europe as inherent but neglected part of European culture. Concomitantly, the New Yorkers discovered the legacy of East European Jewry and its relevance for their own cultural identities and individual biographies.

2. The New York intellectuals

What is known as the 'New York intellectuals' in scholarly literature was in fact a loose group. Most of its members were born in the 1900s and 1920s as first or second generation East European immigrants; most of them had Jewish roots. They grew up in the

1 "Five-Year-Report," (1982), source: NYU University Archives, NYUIH – group 27.4 – series I: A Box 1.

2 See President Jimmy Carter's famous 'malaise' speech "Crisis of Confidence," Washington, D.C., 15 July 1979.

poorer immigrant neighborhoods of New York, visibly affected by the Great Depression. In the 1930s, the majority attended the City College of New York, where they were drawn to Marxism. Their ideological convictions as well as their Jewish roots rendered them largely marginal in an American society still relatively unsympathetic to both. In European culture and modern art, as well as in the stories of the avant-garde artists – likewise marginalized characters in their lifetime – they saw an explanation for their own isolation.[3]

The New York intellectuals are known for their prominent and eventually influential journals. The most important one was *Partisan Review*, which since 1937 favored the exiled Leon Trotsky at the expense of the despised Soviet leader Josef Stalin. Once strong believers in the Soviet Union, they no longer considered it the savior of the international working class. Rising cultural and artistic dogmatism in Moscow had alienated them. Nevertheless, Marxist rhetoric still informed their arguments regarding a possible U.S. entry into World War II, which deeply divided the group: some opposed it as a matter of principle, while others joined the army.

The Allied victory over Nazi Germany rendered such debates obsolete. Despite their vicious attacks on capitalist America *before* the war, *after* 1945 the intellectuals made their peace with the U.S. The extermination of European Jewry had made little difference regarding mobilization and war aims. But with hindsight it inspired a strong identification of many New York intellectuals with the United States as the only bastion against totalitarianism. Based on Hannah Arendt's concept of totalitarianism, Nazism was summarily equated with Stalinism making both equally evil ideologies.[4] This type of American Jewish patriotism found expression particularly in the monthly *Commentary*, founded in 1945.

As the New York intellectuals became 'established' scholars, several drifted to the right. Friendships deteriorated, their circle fell apart. In the 1950s, some emerged as apologetics of McCarthyism, Senator Joseph McCarthy's witch-hunt of suspected Communists. They considered the political persecution deplorable, but necessary. At least, Irving Kristol argued, "there is one thing that the American people know about Senator McCarthy: he, like them, is unequivocally anti-Communist."[5] Striving to dissociate Jews from Communism, execution of the convicted 'atom spies' Ethel and Julius Rosenberg in 1953 found sounding approval. The defendants' counter-claim of anti-Semitism was vigorously rejected as deception and Soviet propaganda. With fascism defeated, the lesson of the Holocaust in Cold War America became unflinching anti-Communism. The

3 N. Jumonville, Critical Crossings. The New York Intellectuals in Postwar America, Berkeley 1991; Id. (ed.), The New York Intellectuals Reader, New York 2007; A. Bloom, Prodigal Sons. The New York Intellectuals and Their World, Oxford 1986.

4 P. Novick, The Holocaust in American Life, New York 1999, pp. 19-61; H. Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism, New York 1951.

5 I. Kristol, Civil Liberties. 1952. A Study in Confusion, in: Commentary 13 (1953) Nr. 3, reprinted in: N. Jumonville, The New York Intellectuals Reader, p. 262 (footnote 3).

few who opposed such dogmatic views founded another magazine with the fitting title *Dissent*.

In addition to these domestic issues, with the onset of the Cold War, the New York intellectuals globalized their anti-Communist fight. The Soviet Union had been dominating the international peace movement. When in 1949 the Moscow-backed so-called World Congress for Peace took place in New York, they felt attacked on home turf. The city's newly anti-Communists staged a counter-rally in the same venue, which drew such a crowd loudspeakers had to transmit the proceedings to outdoors. Thus enthused, the intellectuals founded the 'Americans for Intellectual Freedom' committee. A year later, that same group was instrumental in organizing the 'Congress for Cultural Freedom' in Berlin, the front city of the Cold War, inviting widely known anti-Stalinists and anti-Communists.[6] Hereafter, the Congress served as *the* international umbrella organization in the fight against Soviet propaganda and cultural repression in the Eastern bloc. The Congress established various national chapters and published influential journals such as the French Preuves, the German *Der Monat*, the Italian *Tempo Presente*, and the London-based flagship *Encounter*.[7] In coming years, the Congress held annual meetings in Paris, Milan, Oslo, Salzburg and similarly attractive destinations, generating a jet set of anti-Communist intellectuals.

3. Crisis in the 1960s

For the purpose of this paper, the Congress's activities are less of interest than its controversial demise. By the 1960s, most of New York's former radicals had morphed into staunch Cold Warriors, expressive of a dogmatism that caused frictions with European colleagues in the Congress. Some had come to advise the U.S. president on matters of foreign and public affairs. The opportunity to shape policy-making was tempting, and New York intellectuals used the Congress's and their own magazines, especially *The Public Interest,* to promote U.S. interests. De facto, they had become part of the establishment.[8]

At first glance, this ascendance from the margins of society to the highest echelons of power might suggest their ultimate triumph. But the anti-Vietnam War protests, the Chicano movement, the American Indian movement, feminism, and the Civil Rights movement questioned the very post-war America the New York's intellectuals had helped built. They could not comprehend how a generation that had reaped the benefits of *their* struggle could protest against the status quo and idealize left-wing revolutions in Latin

6 To name but a few: Golo Mann, Franz Borkenau, Raymond Aron, Ignazio Silone, Arthur Koestler, Hugh Trevor-Roper, Eugen Kogon, François Bondy, Benedetto Croce, John Dewey, Karl Jaspers, and Bertrand Russell.

7 P. Coleman, The Liberal Conspiracy. The Congress for Cultural Freedom and the Struggle for the Mind of Postwar Europe, New York 1989; Jumonville, Critical Crossings (footnote 3).

8 W. Isaacson, E. Thomas, The Wise Men. Six friends and the world they made, New York 1986; K. Bird, The Color of Truth. Mc George Bundy and William Bundy, New York 1998.

America. Many dismissed the students' demands as naïve, irrelevant and unrealistic.[9] They were appalled by the riots, the sit-ins and blockades of lecture halls and universities, the spaces for education and self-improvement. Based on their own experiences and contrary to the students, they believed progress and social advancement rested solely with the individual. In return, the students thought of the intellectuals as reactionary, accusing them of "moral failing, personal irresponsibility and intellectual treason."[10]
The crisis peaked in 1967 when newspapers published evidence that the Congress of Cultural Freedom was secretly funded by the C.I.A. The scandalous paradox of an organization that vilified political abuses of culture in the Eastern bloc being in bed with the American secret service undermined the intellectuals' prerogative to act as public conscience. After a series of incidents suggesting the C.I.A. was going rogue – the 1961 Bay of Pigs disaster, the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War – the deliberate deceit of the public was inexcusable.

4. A new start: the *New York Review of Books*

Among those who led the charge against the New York intellectuals and the Congress for Cultural Freedom was a new magazine: the *New York Review of Books.* Although initially, the founding editors Barbara Epstein and Robert Silvers had merely aspired to overcome the poor state of American literary criticism, their editorial shrewdness and general skepticism of the powers that be, U.S. foreign policy and the New York intellectuals' mingling with the political establishment reflected a more general change in attitudes. Within two years of its founding in 1963, the *Review* had become a profitable enterprise. The elaborate essays for which it is still known today echoed the distinctly outward-looking, 'Europhile' and elitist profile typical of intellectuals from New York.[11]
Most importantly, however, it restored the classic understanding American liberalism. In February 1967, the *Review* published a scathing attack on the Congress, in which a young Noam Chomsky accused the New York intellectuals of betraying the public interest and their professional independence.[12] In March, Jason Epstein, vice president of Random House, similarly sneered at his "friends on the right" and their liability for "America's increasingly arrogant and aggrandizing recklessness."[13]
Although re-founded as International Association for Cultural Freedom, the Congress never recovered from the CIA scandal; it eventually dissolved in 1978. Appropriating the Congress' initial goal, scholars and writers around the *New York Review* meanwhile

9 See e.g. N. Glazer, On being Deradicalized, in: Commentary 50 (1970) no. 4, reprinted in: N. Jumonville The New York Intellectuals Reader, New York, 2007, p. 400 (footnote 3).
10 H. Wilford, The New York Intellectuals. From Vanguard to Institution, Manchester 1995, p. 193.
11 A. Brown, The writer's editor, Guardian (January 23, 2004); S. Fender, The New York Review of Books, In: The Yearbook of English Studies 16 (1986), pp. 188-202.
12 N. Chomsky, The Responsibility of Intellectuals, in: New York Review of Books (February 23, 1967).
13 J. Epstein, The CIA and the Intellectuals, in: New York Review of Books (April 20, 1967).

championed the defense of intellectual freedom: in 1971, a business trip to Moscow introduced Robert Bernstein, the CEO of Random House, to the destructive effects of censorship in the Eastern bloc. He began lobbying on behalf of Andrej Sakharov, the nuclear physicist and outspoken critic of the Soviet regime living under house arrest in Gorki. Bernstein's friends soon joined his fight, and Barbara Epstein and Robert Silvers offered the pages of the *Review* for the defense of writers behind the Iron Curtain.

5. The New York University Institute for the Humanities

On December 10, 1976, Richard Sennett gave a talk at New York University on "The Future of the Intellectual Community in New York City."[14] To restore the city's preeminent role as cultural and intellectual capital, he proposed the creation of a new meeting place for professionals, artists and scholars. Sennett's idea struck a cord with the university's authorities, resulting in a series of informal meetings in the spring of 1977. Sennett and NYU president John Sawhill envisioned an institute that would bring together not only New Yorkers, but to "counter the isolationist leaning of American culture in the wake of the Vietnam War" also foreign scholars.[15] By the summer, they had created an advisory board, secured funding and found offices for their new brainchild, the Institute for the Humanities.[16]

Although born in Chicago in 1943, Sennett represents a typical, because exceptional East Coast intellectual. A musical prodigy in his childhood, he had travelled Western Europe at a young age, supported by a father who had fought in the Spanish War. A multi-talented genius, he became a novelist, sociologist, and an urban historian once illness had ended his musical career. Some consider his oeuvre "a life-long attempt to come to terms with his radical heritage, to both honour the idealism of an old left and re-mould it in the light of contemporary realities." [17]

With the help of a friend, the Princeton historian Carl Schorske, Sennett recruited renowned personalities from the city's circles of publishers, scholars and writers, such as Roger Straus of Farrer, Straus & Giroux, the *New York Review*'s editor Robert Silvers and Thomas Bernstein, Robert Bernstein's son, to join the Institute's Board of Trustees. Carl Schorske himself, the historian Thomas Bender, Susan Sontag and her son David Rieff, then editor at Random House, as well as Michael Scammel, a Columbia University graduate and the founder of the British 'Index on Censorship', became the Institute's first

14 Sennett had tested reactions to his ideas at a conference at the Villa Serbelloni, Bellagio, Italy that summer. Among the attendees: Carl Schorske, Clifford Geertz, Anthony Giddens, Shmuel Avineri. NYU Archive: NYUIH – group 37.4 – series I: A Box 3; Folder 13 – Ten Year Report.

15 Ibid.

16 Initial grants came from the National Endowment for the Humanities Fund, Exxon Foundation, and the Ford Foundation, while the university provided office space free of charge. NYUIH Box. No. 1. Group No. 37.4. Series no I:A. Folder 5 – Advisory Board 1978-79.

17 Richard Sennett: Inner-city scholar, in: The Guardian (3 February 2001).

fellows. Two famous Soviet exiles living in New York, the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky and the economist and Nobel Prize laureate Vassily Leontieff, also joined.
Aspiring to promote open interdisciplinary exchanges, Sennett initiated the James and Gallatin public lecture series. The James lectures offered a real live glimpse at foreign scholars that the *New York Review of Books* had often already introduced.[18] In 1978, the Institute's first year, Sennett invited no other but his friend Michel Foucault as well as the philosophers Roland Barthes, Paul Ricœur and a young Bernard-Henri Levy to present.

6. Human Rights and the Return of Liberal Anti-Communism

In 1978, Richard Sennett asked Aryeh Neier, then the American Civil Liberties Union's national director, a position of great prestige and influence, to join the Institute. Born in Berlin in 1937, Neier's Jewish parents had saved the family by emigrating to England in 1939; after the war, they had moved to the U.S. In the 1960s, the heydays of the ACLU, Neier had risen through the ranks of the organization. Despite opposition, Neier had vigorously defended the U.S. constitution's first amendment guaranteeing freedom of speech even for American neo-Nazis like George Lincoln Rockwell.[19] Due to clashes over the defense of white supremacists, however, Neier was considering leaving the ACLU. Although restrained by other obligations, he accepted Sennett's invitation to become a fellow at the Institute.[20]
At the same time, Robert Bernstein also approached Neier. Inspired by recent events in Moscow, Bernstein asked for support in founding a U.S. Helsinki Watch Group.[21] Neier agreed: "Because of our [past] battles against the CIA, I knew that with Bob's involvement in Helsinki Watch it would not be merely a Cold War exercise in denunciations of the Soviet Union."[22] To maintain such non-partisanship, Bernstein, Neier and another friend created a dual structure, in which the Helsinki Watch Group's counterpart, Americas Watch, monitored and criticized human rights violations by right-wing regimes in Latin America that the U.S. supported.
In 1978 as well, the director of the Venice Biennale Carlo Ripa di Meana, "a liberal confronting both the totalitarian regime of the Soviet bloc and his own political opponents in Italy," dedicated the year's exhibition to "Dissent" and personally invited artists in the Eastern bloc, intentionally circumventing national authorities of national academies.[23]

18 First NYU's Humanities Council, and then the Ford Foundation sponsored the series with $50,000. See NYU Archive, "Annual Report 1982-83," NYUIH, Group 37.4, Series I: A, Box 2, Folder 14: Board of Trustees – Meeting 5/6/1983

19 See the U.S. Supreme Court Case Village of Skokie, IL vs. National Socialist Party of America (1977), A. Neier, Taking Liberties. Four Decades in the Struggle for Rights, New York 2003.

20 See Sennett's original letter, July 12, 1978, and Neier's response, July 12, 1978. NYU Archive. NYUIH – group 37.4 – series I: B – Box 6 – Folder 18: Aryeh Neier, 1978-1985.

21 Interview by the author, 27 February 2012, New York City, USA.

22 A. Neier, Taking Liberties, p. 150 (footnote 19).

23 M.-K. Soomre, Art, Politics and Exhibitions. (Re)Writing the History of (Re)Presentations, in: Studies on Art and

The Soviet Ambassador to Italy protested demanding the Italian government would have the theme changed. Ripa di Meana, thus approached, resigned in the name of cultural freedom causing an international scandal.[24] The Italian government backpedaled, and Ripa di Meana returned triumphantly. In December, Bernstein, Silvers, Sontag and Brodsky arrived in Venice to attend the show. Excitedly, Sontag noted in her diary:

> *[Alberto] Moravia met me at the airport; Stephen Spender was just leaving. First dinner with Claude Roy + Loleh Bellon + Geörgy Konrád [sic] (Hungarian writer)* […]*, after an hour at Florian's [café]. Joseph's reading at the Teatro Ateneo* […]. *I had shivers when he stood up and declaimed his poems. He chanted, he sobbed; he looked magnificent. Boris Godunov; Gregorian chant; Hebrew moan.*[25]

The Hungarian György Konrád delivered the Biennale's keynote speech; he was the only East European writer still living in his home country to participate. Konrád explained:

> *I am an Eastern European; I know what repression is like, and my experiences with it did not begin with Stalinism. I attended a small-town Jewish elementary school; out of its 100 students only four of us are alive today. I have known ever since that you cannot trust the state, only a few friends at best.* […] *The death camps provided the twentieth century with the absolute model of evil.* […] *The true symbol of the totalitarian state is not the executioner, but the exemplary bureaucrat who proves to be more loyal to the state than to his friend.*[26]

Enthralled by this description, the New Yorkers sympathized, in fact strongly identified with Konrád, and in January, his speech was reprinted in the *New York Review of Books.*[27]

The unexpected meeting of a like-minded East European dissident in Venice greatly facilitated the New Yorkers' new involvement with the emerging opposition behind the Iron Curtain. In January 1979, Richard Sennett had in vain tried to invite Yuri Orlov, the co-founder of the original Moscow Helsinki Committee who had been sentenced to ten years in prison in the Soviet Union, as a fellow in New York.[28] In December 1979, the *New York Review of Books* published an open letter protesting the imprisonment of

Architecture 21 (2012) no. 3-4, p.115. *Edit Sasvári's article in the present issue also discusses the "dissident Biennale" in detail.*

24 C. Ripa di Meana, News from the Biennale, in: New York Review of Books (15 September 1977).

25 S. Sontag, As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh. Journals and Notebooks, 1964–1980, New York 2012, p. 434.

26 G. Konrád, The Long Work of Liberty, The New York Review of Books (26 January 1978).

27 Ibid.

28 On January 31, 1979, Richard Sennett formally invited Orlov and his wife offering to cover all expenses of their travel and stay. NYUIH – group 37.4 – series I: B Box 6. Folder 21: Yuri Orlov, 1979. In a letter from April 16, 1979, Sennett informed Congressman John Brademas, also a board member, about the invitation, which he had asked the U.S. Ambassador to the USSR to deliver to Orlov's wife. However, the trail had run cold. See letter by Sennett, April 16, 1979, and response by John Brademas, June 25, 1979. NYUIH – group 37.4 – series I: B Box 6. Folder 21: Yuri Orlov, 1979. Brademas was the 13th president of New York University from 1981 until 1992.

the leaders of the Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia. Among the signatories were Robert Bernstein, Aryeh Neier, Richard Sennett, and Susan Sontag.[29]

In 1980, Aryeh Neier assumed the role of director of the Institute for the Humanities. In response to the oppression of Eastern Europe's new, non-Marxist, legalistic and human rights focused opposition, he initiated a lecture series: 'Writing and Politics.' In November 1980, Pavel Kohout, Czech writer and exiled co-founder of the Charta 77, gave the first talk.[30] Neier then introduced a new fellowship program, the 'Humanities in exchange,' because "New York has always been a haven for refugees of all sorts and, in turn, the refugees have made it a great city. Yet today, there are few opportunities for writers in exile to continue their work while sustaining themselves."[31]

With the election of Ronald Reagan as president and the renewal of Cold War tensions in 1980, the New Yorkers positioned themselves left of the American mainstream. Neier, Sennett and Leontieff offered a seminar on "Marxism for Capitalists," while Susan Sontag lectured on "Communism and the Intellectual." Contrary to the pundits of the day, and far from being Marxists, they were shrewd critics of Marxism as well as neo-conservatism. Such expertise justified their claim to an ideological position the original New York intellectuals had long abandoned: *liberal* anti-Communism.

The rise of the independent trade union Solidarność in Poland in the summer of 1980 confirmed the New Yorkers' belief in civic initiatives and change from below. In November, the eminent Polish émigré Leszek Kołakowski, who had been with the New Yorkers in Venice, gave a talk on "The Polish lesson." Around that time, a hitherto unknown hedge-fund manager by the name of George Soros started attending the Institute's lectures. Soros had heard about Aryeh Neier and Robert Bernstein through a common friend. A few weeks prior to Kołakowski's talk, Helsinki Watch had organized a panel in the New York Public Library with Bernstein and the Russian exile Vladimir Bukovsky to coincide with the Moscow Book Fair which had banned both from attending. Soros's friend had called Jeri Laber, the organizer at Helsinki Watch, to request tickets to the event which was already sold out. Laber remembers that the caller "declared in a pointed way: 'Mr. Soros is a very important man,' and added, "he won't stay long. He only wants to meet two people: Vladimir Bukovsky and Bob Bernstein." Something told me it was prudent to say yes."[32]

Soros had been born in Budapest in 1930. His father, a well-connected attorney, had secured the survival of his family and fellow Jewish compatriots with forged identity papers. After the war, Soros left Hungary for the UK, where he eventually studied at the

29 Open Letter, Free the Czechs**,** The New York Review of Books (6 December 1979).

30 NYUIH Group 37.4 – Series I:D Box 24. Folder 9. Pavel Kohout – conversation on writing and politics, 1980. Michael Esch's article in the present issue addresses the Charter 77 from the Czechoslovak perspective.

31 In the fall of 1980, Neier sent out fund-raising letters to various individuals, foundations, and institutions. See e.g. the reasoning in his letter to S.I. Newhouse, 2 October 1982, NYUIH – group 27.4 – series I: A Box 2. Folder 28: Roger Straus – Board of Trustees. For the quote, see: NYUIH – group 37.4 – series I: A Box 3. Folder 13– Ten Year Report.

32 J. Laber, The Courage of Strangers. Coming of Age with the Human Rights Movement, New York 2002, p. 131.

London School of Economics. He also took a class with Karl Popper, whose *Open Society and its Enemies* not only gave him an analytical framework to understand his experiences in occupied Hungary but laid the groundwork to Soros' future philanthropy.[33] In 1956, Soros emigrated to the US, becoming a financial trader and analyst. In 1973, he created Quantum Fund, one of the most successful hedge funds in the history of finance.[34]
Neier's involvement in Helsinki Watch allowed Soros to put Popper's theories on open societies to the test. Soros's interest in Neier's work had been inspired by an unexpected visitor: The Hungarian non-conformist playwright István Eörsi, who had been imprisoned for his participation in the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, had decided to spice up a short-term fellowship in Cleveland, Ohio, with a trip to New York, where he had sought out his lost childhood friend George Soros. Days of fun followed, interspersed with some more serious conversations, in which Eörsi evoked the dangers of dissident life and censorship in Hungary.[35] With millions in the bank, Soros realized he not only should but could help his new-old friend. He then inquired about Bernstein and Neier. Impressed by their activism, Soros decided to contribute $17,000 to the Institute's 1981-82 budget of $60,000.[36] In return, in April 1982, Roger Straus asked him to join the Institute's board of trustees, and Neier offered him a place among the board members of Helsinki Watch.[37] On December 10, 1982, Soros gave a lecture on "The Credit Crisis of 1982." He impressed the audience with his expertise in East European economies and the interdependencies of the world market. Furthermore, he proposed concise reforms of the global financial system to get over an economic crisis that also afflicted the U.S.[38]
In the following academic year, Soros bolstered the Institute's budget with a staggering $95,000.[39] On a practical level, Soros's contributions relieved an institute that despite its intellectual prowess had been on the verge of closing down in 1980.[40] On a personal level, the Institute allowed Soros to realize his long-time dream of a life as philosopher.[41] Soros later explained: "I carried some rather potent messianic fantasies with me from

33 K. Popper, The Open Society and Its Enemies, London 1945; M. Kaufman, Soros. The Life and Times, New York 2002, pp. 70-77.
34 Ibid.; B. Wien and K. Koenen, Soros on Soros. Staying Ahead of the Curve, New York 1995, pp. 3-64.
35 What cannot be discussed here is the source of Eörsi's fellowship, the Fondation pour une Entraide Intellectuelle, a largely known sub-organization of the Congress for Cultural Freedom. Annette Laborey, the Fondation's secretary since 1977 maintained a personal network in Eastern Europe on which Aryeh Neier came to rely heavily.
36 See Edward White's letter to George Soros, 12 July 1982, NUIH – Group No. 37.4. Series no I:A. Box 1– Folder II Board of Directors – George Soros.
37 Letter from Roger Straus to George Soros, dated April 29, 1982, NYUI – group 27.4 – series I: A Box 2.
38 NYUIH Archive, Series II: Audiotapes – Subseries A: 44-2. George Soros. 10 December 1982.
39 NYUIH Archive, Group 37.4, Series I: A Box 2, Folder: Board of Trustees – General 1981-84, Board of Trustees Meeting, November 4, 1982.
40 Until Soros's arrival, the Institute's budget had remained precarious, largely because the university under new leadership repeatedly cut its contributions, which caused a serious clash in 1980 because of which Neier even suggested either abandoning NYU or closing down. Aryeh Neier, Memorandum to Fellows//Board of Trustees, "Subject: The institute's relations with NYU," 23 October 1980, NYUIH – group 37.4 – series I: B Box 6, Folder 18: Aryeh Neier 1978-85. The budget in "Annual Report 1982-83," NYUIH – group 37.4 – series I: A Box 2. Folder 14: Board of Trustees – Meeting 5/6/1983.
41 M. Kaufman, The Life and Times of a Messianic Billionaire, New York 2000, pp. 154-155.

childhood which I felt I had to control […]. But when I had made my way in the world I wanted to indulge my fantasies to the extent that I could afford."[42] One could also speculate that Soros, an East European immigrant who never fully relinquished his Hungarian accent, did not feel fully at home in the socialite circles of New England finance. Among the New York intellectuals and the East European émigrés, however, his background was an asset. Surrounded by like-minded thinkers with comparable experiences, who responded well to his philosophical excursions and philanthropic visions, he revalued his Hungarian-Jewish background in a new light and found a new purpose in life.

7. The Hungarian situation

The academic year of 1981/82 brought more unexpected visitors: three Poles had been stranded abroad after the declaration of martial law in Poland in December 1981 and joined the Institute together with four Hungarians, the sociologists András Kovács and Zsolt Csalog, György Konrád and György Bence, who in the closing lecture of the semester explained the repercussions of opposition in a country that the West hailed as 'the happiest barrack in the Eastern bloc.'[43]

All four Hungarians were members of what had recently become known as the Democratic Opposition. András Kovács was the initiator of one of the earliest Hungarian samizdat projects, *Marx in the Fourth Decade*. In February 1977, he had sent out a questionnaire inquiring about his friends' attitude towards Marxism. He then circulated the twenty-one responses, which largely dismissed Marxism as irrelevant, in apartment seminars.[44] According to the respondents, it had either become obsolete because of socialism's obvious shortcomings or it had actually never played a significant role in their lives.[45] This ideological reassessment reflects the beginning of what Tony Judt describes as "an acknowledgement that the necessary corrective to Communism's defects was not a better Communism but the constitution – or reconstitution – of civil [i.e., bourgeois] society."[46]

Kovács was not only driven by intellectual curiosity, but also by a peculiar apathy in Hungary. Although some of his friends had signed a letter protesting the arrest of Charter 77 leaders in Prague a few weeks prior, the non-conformist circles in Budapest fell short of a Hungarian equivalent to the Charta 77 or the Polish Workers' Defense Committee KOR. Only after Kovács' samizdat venture, did the situation change. Following his initiative, one of Kovács's friends initiated an oppositional diary with the title *A Napló* for those banned and sidelined. Entries varied from poems, jokes, and short stories to notes

42 G. Soros, Underwriting Democracy. Encouraging Free Enterprise and Democratic Reform Among the Soviets and in Eastern Europe, New York, 1991, p. 3.

43 NYUIH Series III: Audio Tapes – Subseries A: 41-5. Gyorgy Bence.

44 A. Kovács, Marx a negyedik évtizedben, in: Beszélő (10 September 1998).

45 Gy. Bence and J. Kis, On Being a Marxist. A Hungarian View, in: The Socialist Register (1980), pp. 263-298.

46 T. Judt, Postwar. A History of Europe since 1945, New York 2005, p. 567.

on everyday life, interactions with authorities, and political views. The so-called Monday Free University, a series of apartment seminars similar to the Polish Flying University, began in 1978 and expanded the circles of philosophers and sociologists who previously had been meeting separately.[47] Lectures touched upon a variety of taboo topics ranging from Russian history and the Bolshevik revolution to the history of Hungarian Communism, the Hungarian minority in Romania to the Revolution of 1956. Such gatherings were an important space of interaction and exchange, a miniscule 'second public' where protests and samizdat text projects could be organized. In the 1980s, human rights became the new language capturing concerns voiced at those meetings, a language the Hungarians shared not only with their Polish and Czech counterparts, but also with the intellectuals in New York.[48]

8. The New York-Budapest connection

The Hungarians fascinated the New Yorkers for two reasons. First, solidarity with them offered the opportunity to defend the claim to freedom of speech as *universal* human right, which emphasized the New Yorkers' anti-Communism as liberal – in contrast to the American neo-conservative mainstream. Second, the stories from far away places, where ideas were still a serious, existential matter, carried a whiff of excitement. The East European intellectuals re-acquainted New Yorkers with the history of European Jewry and its contemporary legacy.

No one exemplifies these correlations between New York and Budapest better than György Konrád. Born in 1933, Konrád had survived the Holocaust in Budapest, whereas his schoolmates from the countryside were murdered. A negligible stint in the Hungarian revolution of 1956 rendered him suspicious in the eyes of authorities. In the 1960s, he was assigned a position as a social worker. Stunned by the injustices in Hungarian society, he processed his experiences in the novel *The Case Worker*, which was published despite its controversial content.[49] In 1973, he testified in the trial of Miklós Haraszti, a younger writer, for an account comparable to *The Case Worker,* about work in a Hungarian tractor factory. Due to international attention, Konrád and Haraszti left the courtroom more or less unscathed.[50] A year later, however, Konrád was arrested. He and a friend, the sociologist Iván Szelényi had worked on a manuscript that analyzed the bureaucratic power hierarchies and inequalities in socialist states. In *The Intelligentsia on the Road to Class*

47 S. Szilágyi (ed.), A Hétfői Szabad Egyetem és a III/III, Budapest 1999.

48 Samuel Moyn claims that human rights were the last grand hope for those who had lost faith in the ideologies of the Enlightenment, such as Marxism and liberalism. He plays on the fact that several East European dissidents, especially the Hungarians, had been previously Marxist revisionists. Neier protests such an interpretation vehemently. S. Moyn, The Last Utopia. Human Rights in History, New York 2010. A. Neier, The International Human Rights Movement, Princeton 2012.

49 [Original]G. Konrád, A látogató, Budapest 1969.

50 The trial concerned M. Haraszti, A Worker in a Workers' State: Piece-Rates in Hungary, New York 1975. B. Falk, The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe, Budapest 2003, pp. 116-118.

Power, the two authors argued that the educated and trained cadres had taken over the role of betraying working class interests. Instead, it was the intelligentsia that controlled the means of production and distribution while protecting its self-made privileges.[51] The study expressed the same principled skepticism towards the powers that be, which the New Yorkers had been articulating since the 1960s.

With the aim of silencing the delinquents, the regime offered exemption from legal proceedings in return for voluntary exile. Iván Szelényi accepted but Konrád chose to stay. Authorities suggested that if only Konrád surrendered the last copy of the manuscript, his upcoming novel *The City-Founder*, which dealt with his experiences in the urban planning department, would – with certain deletions – still be published.[52] Konrád appeared to agree. But four years later, with the *City-Founder* in Hungarian bookstores, *The Intelligentsia on the Road to Class Power* was published in the West: one copy had been smuggled out.[53] To get rid of the stubborn critic, authorities allowed Konrád to travel abroad.

Konrád did not only attend the Venice Biennale in 1978, but also became a returning fellow of the DAAD artist-in-residence program in West Berlin.[54] In the summer of 1983, he made his way to New York. In the eyes of Sennett, Schorske and others, the Hungarian represented the incarnation of Walter Benjamin's flâneur, the observant and reflecting cosmopolitan. In the *New York Times*, Sennett explained the significance of Konrád's writings:

> *In Eastern Europe, where literary modernism is officially forbidden or strongly disapproved of, writers have kept its spirit alive. […] Through the plate glass of our liberty, we are watching the politically oppressed make noble use of our heritage and artistic freedom.*[55]

Konrád represented the quintessential *Central European*. In 1980, Carl Schorske, who had been a founding member of the Institute, published the essay collection *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*.[56] The study of the interplay between cultural modernism and a political disillusionment in Vienna around 1900 had earned him the Pulitzer Prize as well as the

51 G. Konrád and I. Szelényi, The Intelligentsia on the Road to Class Power, New York, 1979. More in: B. Falk, The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe, Budapest, 2005, pp. 109-139.

52 Radio Free Europe reported on the novel: "A Nonconformist Hungarian Novel Presents the Vision of a Humane Socialism," and the interviews Konrád gave while in the West. Radio Free Europe, Background Report, (14 May 1976), HU OSA 36-1-90.

53 For the misuse of the story by anti-Semites in the 1990s, see Gy. Dalos, György Konrad und seine Akten, in: Berliner Zeitung (9 August 2001).

54 Almost every one of the non-conformist writers who is commonly associated with the Democratic Opposition sooner or later went to West Berlin. For a complete list of DAAD fellows refer to http://www.berliner-kuenstlerprogramm.de/de/gaeste.php.

55 R. Sennett, A Dark Novel from Eastern Europe. The Loser by George Konrad, in: New York Times (26 September 1982).

56 C. Schorske, Fin de Siècle Vienna. Politics and Culture, New York 1980.

MacArthur Award. Schorske, whom Neier described as "a man of impeccable character and reliability," donated the award money to the Institute.[57]
Fin-de-Siècle spoke of the decline of 19th century liberalism and the concomitant failure of Jewish assimilation in the Habsburg Empire. In October 1982, a former student of Schorske's, the Hungarian historian Péter Hanák had given a lecture on "Social and Psychological Conflicts over Assimilation in 19th and 20th Hungary." Hanák demonstrated that the Schorskean paradigm also applied to Budapest.[58] The two were part of a larger trend in the academic field of history dealing with the decline of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Looking at this "re-discovery" of Central Europe in the 1980s, the historian Stephen Beller concludes that the

> *Self-image of Central European dissidents such as György Konrád found reinforcement in the Viennese model of a modernist culture that had succeeded by leaving behind the world of 'progress' and 'politics'. The Schorskean vision of retreat from politics into culture was not all that dissimilar from the concept of an 'antipolitics', which sought to escape the ideological politics of* both *East and West.*[59]

Already attuned to *West* European culture prior to meeting the Hungarian writer, the New Yorkers then embraced *Central* Europe and the Central European dissidents in the 1980s. Konrád regards his sojourn in the U.S. in 1983-84 as a pivotal moment in his life. He grew especially close with Susan Sontag, who discovered her own Jewish heritage thanks to Brodsky and Konrád.[60] Richard Sennett, who sincerely cared for Konrád's well being, tried to mobilize publicity on his behalf after authorities in Hungary unleashed a smear campaign against the writer while in New York.[61] Sennett tried to convince Konrád to remain in the U.S., until a return to Hungary was safe.[62] Konrád kindly declined and enjoyed the grand reception the Institute organized in recognition of him winning the prestigious Austrian Herder Prize in 1984.[63] Surrounded by new friends and inspired by the bustling environment, it was at the Institute for the Humanities that Konrád started working on *Anti-Politics*, the book that has forever inscribed him in the annals of East European dissent.[64]

57 See Carl Schorske's letter to Dr. Freund, Vice President of the MacArthur Foundation, 4 November 1981. Group 37.4, Series I:B Box No 7. Folder 7: Carl Schorske, 1980-88. Aryeh Neier, press release, 15 June 1981. NYUIH Group 37.4, Series I:B Box No 7. Folder 7: Carl Schorske, 1980-88.

58 P. Hanák, The Garden and the Workshop, Princeton 1998. Originally published as Hanák, A kert és a műhely, Budapest 1988.

59 S. Beller, Introduction, in Rethinking Vienna 1900, New York 2001, p. 6.

60 G. Konrád, interviewed by the author, 24 July 2009, Hegyeshalom, Hungary; S. Sontag, Consciousness (footnote 25).

61 The appreciation was mutual: Konrád put Sennett, who also published novels, in touch with his German publisher Siegfried Unseld at Suhrkamp. Letter by Richard Sennett to Jürgen Habermas, 4 April, 1984. NYUIH Group 37.4, Series I:B Box No 7. Folder 10: Richard Sennett 1983-84.

62 See a letter Richard Sennett addressed to several officers in the university's administration on February 27, 1984. NYUIH – group 37.4 – series I: B Box 5. Folder 41. George Konrad. 1984

63 NYU Archive, NYUIH, Group 37.4, Series I: D, Folder 11: George Konrad Reception 1984.

64 G. Konrád, Antipolitik. Mitteleuropäische Meditationen, Frankfurt a. M. 1985.

9. The Moment of Triumph

Konrád's experiences as a Holocaust survivor and repressed East European dissident were a reminder to the New Yorkers what their lives *could have* been like. The vast majority of New Yorkers involved were the children of East European Jewish immigrants. So for them, Konrád expanded their view on experiences that they had not lived through themselves, but strongly identified with. Moreover, his thoughts provided a way to bridge the Yalta divide between East and West and allowed the New Yorkers to be part of European culture.

Due to Hungary's peculiar openness – a blessing and a curse for the opposition there – the Americans could reciprocate the visits. In 1983, Jeri Laber arrived in Budapest, concealing her connection to the U.S. Helsinki Watch Group. Neier had asked her to survey the 'needs' of the East European dissidents. A year later, the New Yorkers invited several West European advocate groups to Italy. They founded the International Helsinki Federation, an umbrella organization, which would coordinate the national groups and represent them jointly at the official Helsinki review conferences.[65]

The next review conference was scheduled to take place in Budapest in October 1985. The international friends of Hungary's opposition secretly organized a counter-event. They convinced Konrád to serve as patron, knowing that his fame would attract the necessary media attention. Despite the authorities' half-hearted attempt to obstruct the event, between one hundred and one hundred and fifty Hungarian and Western intellectuals and journalists ended up on the floor of an overcrowded Budapest apartment on October 15. Among them were Aryeh Neier, Susan Sontag and Jeri Laber, the Yugoslav writer Danilo Kis, the Israeli Amos Oz, the British Timothy Garton Ash and the West German Hans Magnus Enzensberger. For two days, the participants of this "Alternative Forum" listened to lectures and reports on censorship, minority rights and the latest news from other opposition movements in Eastern Europe. Radio Free Europe, Deutsche Welle, *The Spectator*, *Libération*, *Neue Züricher Zeitung* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* reported extensively on the highly unusual and exciting event.[66]

Not only with regard to the media attention, but also on a very personal level the forum proved a resounding success. György Konrád used the occasion to evoke the Enlightenment concept of a 'republic of letters': Looking at his friends from either side of the Iron Curtain, he saw a community of writers-citizens, a self-constituted, non-hierarchical, free republic with membership based on merit and equality, held together by friendship and mutual appreciation.[67] And just as the New Yorkers had opened their doors to the

65 J. Laber, Courage, pp. 136-160 (footnote 32).

66 For more on the Alternative Forum, see A., Mink, The Defendant. The State. The Story of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, Budapest 1985, pp. 37-61. T. Garton Ash, "The Hungarian Lesson," in: New York Review of Books 32 (5 December 1985), no. 19.

67 Although often overlooked, Konrád had developed the theme of an international, not just East European intellectual community, already in *Anti-Politics*, which was published in German in the same year as the Alternative Forum took place. G. Konrád, Kapitel 27. Die internationale Integration der Intelligenz, in: Antipolitik.

East Europeans, Konrád returned the favor. In his vision, the republic of letters had members from all over Europe and, he ended, it was "only natural that American and Russian literature belong here too."[68] The New Yorkers had come home again.

68 G Konrád, The Reform of Censorship? in Report on the Cultural Symposium, ed. International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, Vienna 1985, pp. 62–77. Source: HU OSA 318-0-5-Box 2