

A NOTE ON THE LIFE OF IMRE LAKATOS IN OCCUPIED HUNGARY (1944)

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I

In the following few pages I wish to tell a tragic story. It concerns the life of Imre Lakatos (1922-1974), a reputed historian and philosopher of science, whom I did not know personally and whom I have seen only once in my life. The story concerns an unknown episode in Lakatos' life during the German occupation of Hungary. It is about the exercise of absolute psychological domination over a small group of people: Lakatos' ideologically-founded grip over the lives of others was strong enough to allow him to induce a young woman to commit suicide.

Occupied Hungary anno 1944 is an extreme context. Although not immensely distant from us in time -- witnesses who have gone through the period are still living with us -- it is enormously remote as to its conditions of life. Can we pass a judgment over what happened there and then? It is certainly not up to us. But the fact that we must not judge the conduct of people there and then does not imply that we should not seek to know what has happened. We can - and in my view should -- take cognizance of the facts and integrate that knowledge within our picture of Imre Lakatos the historian of science. Indeed, historians of science and ideas have long abandoned the study of disembodied ideas. Today they rather study the thoughts and actions of their subjects from an hermeneutical perspective: they assume, like anthropologists in the verstehende tradition, that the sum-total of a person's thoughts and actions in the various domains is somehow united and integrated by certain, not necessarily explicit, underlying principles. The consequence of this methodological assumption is that information on the conduct and thoughts of a subject in one domain may -- indeed is likely to -- throw important light on his or her conduct and thoughts in other domains. This was also Imre Toth's view when he sought to publish Gottlob Frege's anti-Semitic tracts, in the belief that they are relevant to the understanding of Frege's scientific work. I will however leave it to others to try to identify whatever concealed link between Lakatos' conduct in 1944 and the philosophy of science he was to elaborate two and a half decades later.

II

In February 1989, Mrs Myriam Ziman née Izsák privately published in Israel a small booklet devoted to the memory of her sister Eva. The booklet is bilingual -- Hungarian and Hebrew (70 and 44 pages, respectively). The original was written in Hungarian and was then translated into Hebrew by a

family friend. The following is based on the Hebrew text, but was checked against the Hungarian original by Dr. Gábor Pállo of Budapest. In 1993 or thereabout Imre Toth gave me a copy of the booklet, saying I would find interest in reading it. He did not err. The thought of the events recounted in the booklet has been on my mind ever since, and with it the haunting question whether it is my duty to bring them to the knowledge of a public of historians of science. Commemorative booklets abound in Israel in recent years: many Holocaust survivors wish to perpetuate the memory of their relatives that have been exterminated and to avoid that that memory, and the memory of the terrible things through which they have themselves gone, disappear with their own death. Mrs Ziman's account of the death of her sister is singular even within this context, because it tells the story of an avoidable death, one that was not directly perpetuated by the Nazis, but by a Communist resistance group of which Eva Izsák was a member and which was headed by Imre Lakatos, then Lipschitz.¹ One can only feel deep empathy with Mrs Ziman's attempt to construct for her sister a "Gravestone of Letters and Tears."²

Myriam and Eva Izsák, born respectively in 1923 and 1925, grew up (along with six other children) in a moderately religious bourgeois Jewish family in Szatmár (Satu-Mare³), a town in Transylvania with a then large Jewish population, which was Hungarian until the First World War, but has become Rumanian after it.⁴ When Myriam was nine, she joined the Zionist-

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1. On Lakatos' changes of names, John Worrall provides the following explanation: "During the Nazi occupation of Hungary he changed his name from the patently Jewish Imre Lipschitz to the safer Imre Molnár. After the war he was, however, reunited with a set of his shirts monogrammed 'I.L.'. Faced with this major problem (shirts like most other things were in short supply) and now a devoted communist, he again changed his name to the more working class Imre Lakatos." John Worrall, "Nachruf auf Imre Lakatos. Imre Lakatos (1922-1974): Philosoph of Mathematics and Philosoph of Science," *Allgemeine Zeitschrift für Wissenschaftstheorie* 5 (1974), 211-17, on p. 211.
 2. Myriam Ziman, Mazeva me-Otiyot u-Dema'ot (= A Gravestone of Letters and Tears) (Ra'anana, privately published [P.O.B. 388], 1989).
 3. In what follows, I follow Mrs Ziman in using the Hungarian names of places, then in use.
 4. On the history of Jews in Satu-Mare cf. the article in the Encyclopedia Judaica (Jerusalem, 1972), 14:908-09.

socialist pioneering youth movement ha-Shomer ha-Zair,⁵ followed by her younger sister. When the war broke out, Myriam and Eva's house became the center for anti-Fascist resistance in Szatmár. In 1940 they went into clandestinity. At that time, the ha-Shomer ha-Zair movement in Transylvania dissolved, because some of its members succeeded in leaving the country and most of the remaining young people were taken to labor camps. Like many others, Myriam and Eva found their way from anti-Fascist activity to the Communist Party.

After Szatmár passed into the hands of the Hungarians in 1940, the two sisters pursued their anti-Fascist activity, collecting funds during the day and distributing tracts against the war during the night. In 1941, the Hungarian political police got on their trails, and the sisters had to flee. They settled in a small room in Budapest, where they both found work and where they continued their anti-Fascist engagement. At one point, the Party ordered Eva back to Szatmár, in order to help Party members in Transylvania to face persecutions; she was followed there by her sister in the end of 1943. After the German occupation of Hungary on 19 March 1944 and the subsequent establishment of a Ghetto in Szatmár, the ways of the two sisters fell apart. A Party member, named Magda Berkó, offered to take both sisters to Budapest and hide them there. However, a friend of Eva who was in love with her insisted that he could find a safe hiding for her in Nagyvárad (Oradea-Mare). In April 1944 Myriam and Eva left Szatmár, heading for Budapest and Nagyvárad, respectively. They made a part of the way together and then silently took leave in a small railway station. They were not to see each other again.

In Budapest Myriam's friends succeeded in getting falsified papers and work for her. Her "good" papers allowed her to move freely through Budapest, where she witnessed many of the horrors of the war and of the anti-Jewish persecutions. The postal services continued to function properly, and Myriam could keep contact with her sister Eva in Nagyvárad. "At first," she writes, "everything was in order." Eva wrote that she had met "interesting people who were on a high intellectual level and who taught her important things." ("These intellectuals were to be her murderers," Myriam Ziman adds in a bitter aside.) After a while, though, things changed. Eva "wrote to me that one of the comrades had severely criticized our correspondence. According to her allegations, our correspondence was replete with petit-bourgeois sentimentality." And Myriam adds:

This arrogant criticism and the interference in our private lives infuriated me. I wrote back to Eva that no one had the right to read our letters nor to criticize their content or style. I did not imagine

⁵ On it cf. Encyclopedia Judaica, op. cit., 7:1372-7.

that the false Party members have already got hold over Eva's life. I did not understand that Eva is in fact imprisoned in their hands and that she could not do anything without their permission.⁶

The resistance group to which Eva had adhered and which had got such a strong grip over her life was headed by Imre Lipschitz, who was to become known under the name Imre Lakatos, and by his wife Eva Révész.

After a short while, Eva informed her sister that her hiding place in Nagyvárád became unsafe and that she had to find a new hiding. A friend of Myriam immediately wrote to Eva, suggesting that she hide with a good friend of his; this letter was apparently never delivered to Eva by the members of the cell. After a while, another opportunity to save Eva presented itself, when a Party member, Ilona Jeremias, suggested to move her to Kolozsvár, where she had a safe hiding for her. As Myriam learnt after the war, this offer was discussed in the cell, but was rejected (because Jeremias' husband had been arrested a little before and Jeremias herself was thought to be in danger). When Eva failed to show up, Jeremias went to Nagyvárád to look after her. She was met by a member of the cell, who told her that Eva had moved to another town (Temesvár) and was safe. At that time, however, Eva was still in Nagyvárád; she was to be assassinated a couple of days later. Jeremias returned home reassured and wrote back to Myriam that she need not worry for her sister. A few days after getting this letter, Myriam received from Eva her last letter. It was thrown to her room through the open window by a member of the cell, in fact (as it turned out later) the very same person who had accompanied Eva to her death. Its concluding lines ran: "We have to stop corresponding for a while. I am OK; I am always OK. I love you."⁷

The war was soon over. When it became possible, Myriam returned to her home town, where she began to search for her sister. She went to Nagyvárád, where she met Alfonse Weisz, a member of the Party cell, who had now become a Communist functionary. The ensuing dialogue, as recorded by Myriam, is worth reproducing.

"Where is Eva," I asked impatiently. "Eva is no more," he replied tersely. I did not understand. I thought he was joking. "What does it mean she is no more?!", I yelled at him. Suddenly tears were flushing out of my eyes. "What is it? What has happened? I did not know Marxists were crying," he said. I did not understand what he

6 A Gravestone, p. 12 (Heb); p. 19 (Hung.)

7 Ibid., p. 14 and 20, respectively.

was saying. I had never heard that Marxists were devoid of emotions and that they underlie an interdiction to cry and to shed tears. ... "Well, can you finally tell me what has happened to Eva?" I asked him in anger and dread. "Eva tried to pass to Rumania, the border guards discovered her and liquidated her near Temesvar," Weisz answered coldly and without sentiments, as befits an objective and emotionless Marxist.

Back in Szatmár, Myriam and her friends slowly realized that the truth was deliberately withheld from them. A friend who was with the security forces conducted an inquiry and soon the truth came out. Here is Myriam's account of the truth about her sister's death:

Well, I did not err. Eva has not been liquidated by the border guards. Rather, a band of sophisticated murderers liquidated her cruelly in cold blood. Yes, the gang of the couple Lipschitz-Révész assassinated her!! Here are the facts: during her stay in Nagyvárad, Eva joined a group of people, who, instead of investing their efforts in helping one another in order to survive, wasted their time in useless "philosophical" discussions. This group was headed by a man named Imre Lipschitz. This man, owing to his "erudition" in Marxist ideology, and as a result of his powerful personality, succeeded in dominating the members of the cell and tyrannized them continually. The members of the cell, who were younger than him, saw him as the representative of the Communist Party and accepted what he said blindly and without opposition. Eva Révész, Imre Lipschitz's wife, joined hands with her husband -- they called themselves the "Marxist couple" -- and the two of them intervened in and domineered the private lives of the cell members, who were inexperienced young persons.

For various reasons, the cell members did not find a hiding place for Eva. They could have sent her to me to Budapest, or to Ilona Jeremias in Kolozsvár, but the couple Lipschitz-Révész rejected all propositions. Following "Marxist" considerations, they left open only one solution: in order to save the lives of the other members, Eva must commit suicide. Lipschitz made this proposal to the cell and grounded it in an ideological reasoning. The proposal was accepted by a majority vote.⁸

I later learnt that the comrade who had criticized the petit-bourgeois style of our correspondence was Eva Révész, who,

8 Ibid., p. 16 and 24, respectively.

immediately after the vote in which it was decided to execute Eva, asked to get her winter coat. Her arguments were indeed devoid of all petit-bourgeois sentimentality and she acted according to pure Marxist objectivity: she declared in front of the cell members that dead persons do not need winter coats, they do not suffer from cold.⁹

After the vote, as befits cold-blooded and emotionless Marxists, they prepared a detailed plan, including fixing the time and the place for the execution. They bought poison and transferred Eva, accompanied by Nyuszi Levente, one of the comrades, to Debrecen, the town that was chosen for the sacrifice.

Nyuszi Levente, the man who was charged with accompanying Eva to Debrecen and with supervising the execution, returned after it to Nagyvárad in order to report to the cell members and to the couple Lipschitz-Révész. He told them that the preparations, including searching for a suitable place, had lasted a couple of days, and that in the meanwhile Eva stayed in his family's home. I am shivering at the thought of Eva's last days. She stayed among strangers, in a room that has become for her a death cell, and waited for a miracle. But no miracle happened. The Marxists have planned everything and made sure the execution would be perfect.

"When will death ensue?" were Eva's last words.

Eva died. No one knows where she is buried. Nyuszi Levente left her body under the trees and went away. Children who were playing nearby found it and called the police. The authorities buried her, but no one knows where.¹⁰

Our interest here is not in the tragic fate of Eva Izsák per se, nor even in the fact that this was apparently an avoidable death. What is of relevance to us is the domination which Imre Lipschitz-Lakatos and his wife exerted over the lives of a group of young people and the right of which they appropriated themselves to take decisions over the life and death of others. The atmosphere in the group of which the "Marxist couple" was the unchallenged authoritarian leader comes to the fore in testimonies given during the police investigations which were carried

9 ibid., 12-3 and 19, respectively.

10 ibid., p. 15-6 and 24-5, respectively.

out immediately after the war.

III

The record of the questioning of Alfonse Weisz, one of the members of the cell, conducted by the political section of the Rumanian police on June 18-19, 1945 and reproduced in Mrs Ziman's book,¹¹ reads as follows (excerpts):

Question: What do you know about Imre Lipschitz and about Eva Révész? What do you think about their personalities? What do you think about their education and about their fidelity to the Party?

Answer: In my view, and in that of all Party members who knew them, they can be said to be very learned persons. Lipschitz, according to his own statement, was a student in the Faculty of chemistry. Eva Révész reached a very high level in Marxist ideology.

Q. We want to know more about your connection with Lipschitz and Eva Révész.

A. We met every evening to discuss general matters and urgent needs.

Q. What were the discussions about?

A. The discussions turned about studies and researches in Marxist ideology. ...

Q. Why did Nyuszi Levente take Eva to Debrecen?

A. There was a discussion in which took part Lipschitz, Eva Révész and ... [four other persons]. I too was present. In this discussion, it was unanimously decided that Eva Izsák must commit suicide. Nyuszi Levente was to be responsible for carrying out the decision. His task was to take her to Debrecen and see to it that she indeed commit suicide.

Q. Who convened the meeting? Who brought up the idea of suicide?

A. Comrade Imre Lipschitz.

Q. What were his arguments?

A. According to him, all possibilities to find a hiding place for Eva Izsák had been checked, but our efforts proved fruitless. Lipschitz succeeded in persuading us that in the absence of a hiding place, the authorities would arrest Eva Izsák and her arrest would lead to that of tens of valuable comrades.

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11 ibid., 17-29 and 27-45, respectively.

Q. According to the information at our disposal, Eva Izsák got a telegram which instructed her to go to Kolozsvár, where a Party member named Ilona [Jeremias] undertook to make all necessary arrangements to hide her. Why did you not send Eva Izsák to Kolozsvár?

A. The husband of the Party member Ilona [Jeremias] was arrested, so Ilona herself was in danger and there was no point in sending Eva to Kolozsvár.

Q. You said you knew all about that telegram?

A. Yes, the telegram was delivered to the house where I lived.

Q. Who else knew about the instructions contained in the telegram?

A. First of all, Imre Lipschitz. ...

Q. Why did you not hand the telegram first of all to Eva Izsák?

A. In our group the rule was that all information and all letters were delivered first of all to the head of the cell, and only afterwards to the cell members.

...

Q. Can you give us details about Eva Izsák's journey to Debrecen?

A. Imre Lipschitz asked to talk to her. In this conversation he informed her of the cell's decision. He told her she had to leave the town with the train at 7 p.m.

Q. What do you know about Eva Izsák's fate?

A. Comrade Nyuszi [Levente] came back after a month and reported that Eva had taken poison in his presence.

Q. What other details about Eva Izsák's death were brought to the knowledge of the cell?

A. He told us that Eva stayed a couple of days in his family's house. In the meanwhile he looked for an appropriate place.

Q. Please be more precise.

A. Nyuszi said that they went to the forest near the town of Debrecen. They found a hidden place, Nyuszi brought water and Eva Izsák swallowed the poison. She was strong and calm, because Nyuszi had assured her that the poison would act within seconds. She asked Nyuszi whether the poison would indeed act immediately, but did not even finish the sentence. She lost consciousness, began to choke, green saliva ran out of her mouth and she died. Nyuszi added that he had hidden the corpse under nearby bushes.

....

Q. How did the comrades react to the news of Eva Izsák's death?

A. Imre Lipschitz wanted to know whether a photograph of Eva's corpse had appeared in the press. He feared she might be identified. Everyone asked questions. Yes, Lipschitz criticized Nyuszi, for in his opinion he had to come back to Nagyvárad immediately.

Q. I repeat my question: how did the cell members react to Eva Izsák's suicide?

A. I myself asked him about Eva's behavior in the last minutes.

Q. You do not answer the question. Did Eva's death reassure you?

A. Imre Lipschitz and Eva Révész became reassured. I was not, no I wasn't.

....

Q. According to the information at our disposal, you sent Eva Izsák to Debrecen only with the cloths she was wearing. What did you do with all the objects that remained in your hands?

A. Yes, this is true, Eva travelled to Debrecen only with the cloths she had on her. Her suitcases remained with the family Karakas and were later transferred to the house of the family Wetternek. No. Not all her things. Comrade Lipschitz asked to get Eva's winter coat for his wife, Eva Révész.

....

Q. Did you remain in contact with members of the cell after the liberation of Nagyvárad by the Red Army?

A. Yes. After the liberation of the town by the Red Army the ties between us got ever deeper. We shared an apartment and formed a kind of a commune. ... At first, Imre Lipschitz and Eva Révész lived with us; later they moved to Debrecen.

....

Q. When you informed Eva Izsák that she must commit suicide -- how did she react to the death sentence you pronounced on her?

A. She asked whether there was no way except suicide. Lipschitz succeeded in convincing her that this was the only way. He made clear to her, that ideology without practical implementation becomes a hinderance on the way to the revolution's victory. Eva understood that the only way which was open to her was suicide.

Q. In one of the earlier hearings you said that Eva Izsák supplicated and asked again and again to reconsider the matter.

A. I never used the expression "supplicated." To the contrary, Eva behaved very bravely and heroically. She only asked to know whether there was no way except suicide.

Q. [After the war], why did you not ask Eva's sister,

Comrade Mancit [Myriam] Izsák, to turn to the authorities with a request for an investigation?

A. ... I informed many Party members of what had happened. In addition, I suggested to Comrade Wetternek to address to the appropriate authorities a complaint against Lipschitz.

Q. But you took part in the decision. If Lipschitz were found guilty, you would have been considered accountable too.

A. By no means. In the period I have described, we were under Lipschitz's negative influence. I must emphasize that after reflection, I arrived at the conclusion that we acted under instructions that are at variance with the spirit of the Party.

....

Q. Do you have anything to add?

A. The Party members who had directed me to the couple Lipschitz-Révész told me that they had a broad Marxist learning. I was told that being in contact with them would help me to develop and consolidate my own Marxist worldview. At that period, my knowledge of the Marxist theory was incomplete, and therefore I viewed them as superior people. Not only I, we all were helpless in the face of their tyrannical conduct. Yes, we had to accept their views and execute their orders without hesitation -- otherwise they would immediately denounced us as mentally crippled petit-bourgeois, who stand no chance of ideological improvement. In our eyes they were invested with supreme authority. As I mentioned, our Marxist education was incomplete and we were defenseless in face of their superiority feelings. Today it is clear to me that it is they who imposed upon us the ill-fated decision which led to the death of Eva Izsák. By the way: one day Lipschitz gathered us and told us that the Party requests that we all commit suicide. As unbelievable as this may seem, we did not think of appealing against this decision and we asked no questions. We were ready to commit suicide. Lipschitz praised us and said he only wished to test our faithfulness to the Party and our ideological maturity.

Q. What was the character of the relationship between you and Eva Izsák?

A. We had made love. While Eva stayed in the house of the Wetterneks, she let me understand that she was in love with me. From the doctrine we were taught by the couple Lipschitz-Révész we learnt that the goal of the relations between a man and a woman was to strengthen the working class. Therefore, we made love only when we were convinced that the relations between us could further our ideological maturity and enable us to participate more forcefully in the class struggle.

Q. What you say makes clear that Eva Izsák loved you, gave you everything she had to offer. And still, you were among those

who voted for her execution?

A. Eva Izsák and I belonged to the Lipschitz group. We were in an atmosphere of authority and tyranny. No one hesitated to carry out the group's decisions and no one dared stand up against the authority of the couple Lipschitz-Révész.

The testimony of Ödön Wetternek, a cell member whose family had hidden Eva between May and August 1944, given on June 18, 1945, reads as follows¹²:

Q. What do you know about Eva Izsák's journey to Debrecen?

A. When it became clear to us that we could not find a hiding place for Eva Izsák, the cell members were convened for a discussion. Imre Lipschitz told us that there was no other alternative, Eva Izsák had to commit suicide. After a short discussion we realized that a suicide in Nagyvárád would be a source of danger to us: if the police discovered her corpse and open an investigation, we would all be arrested. In view of these considerations, it was decided that Eva Izsák must commit suicide as far as possible from Nagyvárád. After a long discussion, it was unanimously decided that the most fitting place was the town of Debrecen. We made our adieu to her, Nyuszi went with her to the railway station and they left. That's it.

Q. You said that the cell members were convened. Who was present in the meeting?

A. All the members of the cell.

Q. How did you arrive at the conclusion that Eva must commit suicide?

A. It became clear to us that it was impossible to hide her any longer. We found no solution for her.

Q. Who brought up the idea of suicide?

A. I already said that Imre Lipschitz told us that Eva Izsák had to commit suicide, because she became a danger for all the cell members. Moreover, she was a danger not only for us, but also for Party members in other towns.

Q. We understand that you had a discussion and that you decided Eva Izsák had to commit suicide in order to save the other cell members.

A. Yes, this is right. All the members of the cell were present and decided unanimously that Eva Izsák must commit suicide.

Q. We ask again: who was the instigator, who led the discussion?

12 Ibid., 29-39 and 46-62, respectively.

A. I already said: Imre Lipschitz.

.....

Q. How did the cell members react to the report [of Eva's suicide]?

A. Imre Lipschitz declared that the danger was over; we no longer had to fear the police.

IV

A couple of concluding remarks are in order now. First, we should treat the above testimonies with caution. At the time they were given, Lakatos was apparently already "deviating" from the Party line and hence the questioned persons could feel encouraged to burden him with all the responsibility for what had happened. (Thus in his testimony, Alfonse Weisz said that after the war, Imre Lipschitz "deteriorated" because his petit-bourgeois pride and his lack of self-criticism prevented him from admitting his failures. Since he "fell ever deeper," Eva Révész, who remained faithful to the Party line, divorced him.¹³) Still, it seems quite certain that the basic facts are true and, above all, that Lakatos' power over the minds of the cell members was absolute, as was his readiness to exercise absolute psychological domination.

Second, let me reiterate that our interest here is not in judging Imre Lakatos' behavior from a moral perspective; any attempt to do so by an outsider to the period would be morally presumptuous. Nor should we be interested in Lakatos and his comrades' absolute commitment to the Communist ideology -- in the war years in which the Red Army appeared as the savior of Eastern Europe from the Nazi barbarism, Marxism (even in its Stalinist garb) appeared to many (and indeed could naturally appear) as the ultimate liberating ideology, the anti-thesis to Nazism.

The salient points here concern mainly the psychological cum ideological domination Lakatos exerted over his group. How should we interpret this? I do not think we should consider it as a simple instantiation, on a local, reduced scale, of Stalinism. Rather, it seems to me that the phenomenon in question -- the exercise of ideologically-grounded absolute power over a small closely-knit group -- is essentially that of a religious sect. This comes to the fore with particular acuity and force in the cell members' unconditional readiness to commit collective suicide at the behest of the leader. Also the phenomenon of a leadership by a charismatic couple is familiar from the history of religious sects.

13 Ibid., p. 28 and 43, respectively.

Also important is the point made by Myriam Ziman in her narrative: Lakatos not only saw himself justified to pronounce a death sentence over a 21-year old woman, but he legitimized his decision in purely would-be rational, ideological, considerations, from which all emotional element was conspicuously absent. It is perhaps not amiss to recall that safeguarding the role of rationality in science was a primary concern of Imre Lakatos' philosophy of science.