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Play Time

On difficult days I sometimes tell friends that I'd like to live in a small, clean hut somewhere in Hungary, surrounded by apricot trees. I would tend a few goats and contemplate nature. We laugh. One friend has always wanted to be a bellringer in a Tibetan monastery, another would like to herd llamas in Peru.

In the summer of 1960 Edmund Wilson, then sixty-five, decided to learn Hungarian. He was living in an ancestral limestone house in Talcottville, northwest of Utica in upstate New York, where he'd spent most summers since the early 1950s. He knew of only one Hungarian in the area, a young woman, Mary Pcolar, who worked in a local pharmacy. She was, he found, literate in Hungarian as well as in English. I learned this from *Upstate: Records and Recollections of Northern New York*, the diary-notebook Wilson kept about his forebears, the house, and his day-to-day life there until 1970. On first reading it fifteen years ago I was puzzled by Wilson's decision. Since the book begins with an account of his distinguished Yankee family, and the grounds of their home with its old peony beds, his Hungarian plan struck an odd note. Hungarian is the language of my background, although at the time I discovered *Upstate* I could barely speak more than a few words of greeting. Wilson, of course, was well known for his linguistic prowess. But if Hungarian seemed a peculiar choice, the decision to teach oneself a language seemed even odder, the kind of thing people did in books, and a special kind of person at that: someone with world enough and time. Wilson already knew six languages. Why another?

Like most North Americans, I had my first experience of a foreign language in high school. I still remember the worn French primer, my name added to the last page under a list of students who had previously used it; study-halls where I memorized French conjugations, surprised at my mistakes; those initial, stumbling efforts at pronunciation in a roomful of adolescents all hoping someone else would be called on; and, inevitably, our teachers—always women, usually spinsters—who oversaw this rite. Miss Emma Campbell was a small, dark woman with thinning black hair everyone thought dyed, and rimless glasses. But she had an intense and animated face, apparently finding a mission in our initiation to the gender differences that made French nouns so peculiar. (Hungarian has no grammatical gender, but that's another story.) One day Miss Campbell entered the room to see a swastika chalked on the blackboard. Crossing to it, her expression resolute, she lifted an eraser. "This has caused enough trouble," she said softly as the graffiti vanished. She then faced the class and began describing an orphanage in France that she visited every summer, a place for children who had lost their parents during the Second World War. The swastika (and other crimes of history) was transformed by mid-west know-how: Miss Campbell helped our class arrange a bake sale to raise money for the orphans.

Next came Miss Coral McMillan, a robin-plump woman in her late fifties who always wore dresses with matching jackets and a single strand of large, even pearls. For several years she took us deeper into the language, and I still can't look at the summer constellations without recalling a story in Alphonse Daudet's *Lettres de mon moulin* where a lonely shepherd takes comfort in the stars. Here we moved from the rites of language to the rites of culture; all those conjugations began to cohere into something. One Christmas, to our surprise, Miss McMillan settled at an old upright piano at the back of the classroom and led us through several French songs, starting with "*Dominique*," which had just swept the country. Then she offered to sing for us, and her thin but serviceable soprano began "*La vie en rose*." My seat was at the back of the room and I watched her, transfixed, as she accompanied herself. Her eyes glistened and the fragile melody—made sadder by her quaver—filled the room with melancholy. What lost love came to her mind as she sang, what pain did she conceal? (I was reading *The Charterhouse of Parma*, in translation.)

By the time I started university, where languages could be studied systematically, French no longer seemed a mystery even when it was a pleasure, and I was on the road of American language training. It didn't take long to see that French wasn't for men, since the ratio of women to men in French class was three to one. German, Latin, Greek—here the balance evened out. But these were languages in the service of something else: requirements for advanced degrees. French, in comparison, seemed frivolous. Today I know only a few university graduates—or academics—who have ever used the languages they piled up, and fewer who read in them for pleasure. They may secretly vow to perfect a favorite one again, some day, but apart from attempts (soon abandoned) to follow local newspapers during European travels, or order meals while visiting Quebec, languages studied as academic requirements remain a thing of the past, along with old yearbooks. And yet a belief in their value remains. They are a rite of civilization, of class and mobility—like music lessons.

In the tradition of nineteenth-century amateurs (now called "men of letters") from Carlyle to Thoreau, Edmund Wilson was an amateur in the best sense: he wanted to understand, to make sense of, anything that held his attention. Yet I can't help wondering if he would have decided to learn Hungarian at an earlier point in his life. Perhaps timing is all. In the summer of 1960 Wilson received a volume of his plays translated into Hungarian—hardly reason enough to struggle with a notoriously difficult language, even for a writer with a considerable ego. But he had time on his hands and no intention of spending it gardening. (The Talcottville house might seem a city dweller's dream, but Wilson's diary shows him largely oblivious to its pastoral charms.) This is not unimportant. There has to be some reason to begin the study of a new language, even if one has a natural aptitude for it, and then to keep up the rote drill required.

In his life away from Talcottville, Wilson knew several Hungarian intellectuals who had settled in the United States—among them Istvan Déak, a professor of European history at Columbia, and Zoltan Haraszti, the former librarian of the Rare Books Department of the Boston Public Library. He and Haraszti often met in Cambridge to discuss Hungarian writers—Wilson is vague about this process, or how much Hungarian he knew—but he may have brought some acquaintance with the language to his sessions with Mary Pcolar. That her language skills were not all that

impressed him is clear from his description of her as "a very handsome girl in whom the Mongolian stock is evident: high cheekbones, slightly slanting gray eyes, set rather wide apart, a figure erect and well built." Alone, in the country, he was drawn to her, although she was married with three children and an unlikely candidate for romance. Aware of his reputation as a ladies' man, Mary Pcolar still agreed to teach him Hungarian if he would teach her French.

A friendship developed between the two, and Wilson often accompanied Mary and her husband to the movies. His attachment to her did not go unnoticed by his family, who sent him this April Fool telegram: "We request the honor of your presence at banquet and would like you to judge beauty contest of New England chapter of Magyar women." Mary, who confessed to Wilson that she had little time for herself and felt overwhelmed by tending to the needs of others, had a temperament suited to him. He accepted the fact that she had been born in the United States and had learned her parents' language as children of immigrants often do—randomly, without careful study. This meant that Mary knew Hungarian but could not always explain the grammatical conventions that interested Wilson. Yet her amateur status appealed to him, and they consulted grammar books together.

I mention this in some detail because any decision to learn a new language carries with it the inevitable problem of finding a teacher—the right teacher. Fortunately the city I live in has a large Hungarian community, most of whom came after the abortive revolution of 1956. Along Bloor Street West, within walking distance of the University of Toronto, they supplied "ethnic" charm with their restaurants, feeding several generations of students on cheap greasy schnitzels. Although gentrification now rules their stretch of Bloor, they haven't entirely disappeared. Today the children of these immigrants often enrol in Introductory Hungarian courses offered at night by the university, or at local high schools. My own attempts to learn Hungarian over the past decade have always been defeated by them. Each time I've registered in a course, with the assurance that it would be *introductory*, I was soon lost in a room of young people who already had more than a rudimentary knowledge of the language. Occasionally another student would be in my position—usually a young woman who had married into a Hungarian family—and we would soon visit the registrar's office for a refund of our

tuition. Almost giving up the idea, I decided that my next approach would be to find a private tutor, someone who knew the language and could also teach it. When I did, in time, find one it felt like a moral imperative to begin my studies. But the question that dogged me, since I have no particular flair for learning languages, was why bother now?

My mother had saved a box full of letters my great-grandfather sent his daughters, who came to America in 1909, and for some years I had been curious about them. Without romanticizing another time, it seemed important to understand alternatives to our own. Even as a child I felt more connected to the Hungarian manner and temperament I saw around me than to the relentless culture that threatened to swallow up all differences in its icons and dreams, from perfect suburban lawns to Elvis Presley. This feeling is still there, although the icons have changed to designer boutiques and plentiful, inexpensive guns. I'm also sure that I had sensed that Hungarian-ness was something foreign to the 1950s in North America, something unwelcome, wrong. Perhaps this is why I showed little interest in learning Hungarian as a child.

A box of old letters, however, wasn't reason enough to study the language today. And since my mother had written out translations of the most interesting ones, there was no need to trouble with the originals themselves. I think my resolve formed when I read several histories of Hungarian literature, and found that important writers had been neglected in the English-speaking world simply because they hadn't been translated. A *New Yorker* profile of turn-of-the-century novelist Gyula Krúdy, by the Hungarian-born historian John Lukacs, fed my desire. In Lukacs's hands Krúdy's bohemian life in the twilight world of old Buda became an invitation. I looked for books by Krúdy in translation but found only one of his stories in an anthology of Hungarian fiction, published in Budapest for export sale. Along with writers such as Endre Ady, Zsigmond Móricz, and Margit Kaffka—also largely untranslated—Krúdy seemed to hold a key to something I wanted to understand, without knowing what it was.

Most of the time we're in control of our work, and any challenges tend to be predictable ones—we're trained for them, we get the lay of the land, we adjust. A new language won't co-operate with the need to be in control; part of the nature of its newness is that we aren't, and can't be. Of course it will have familiar elements, the parts of speech we once parsed in grammar classes. Yet this is really a matter of faith until you

have sufficient grasp of the language. The inevitable response to this unfamiliarity—that all one needs is a large enough vocabulary—leads only to more words. Why? Because learning a language is learning a new way of thinking, and that's more than a matter of vocabulary, or word order, or linguistic conventions. Not that they don't have a place in approaching a new language—they do. The best grammar review of one's own language is the attempt to learn another.

Hungarian is a member of the Finno-Urgic language group, not an Indo-European language. Finnish is one branch, and the Urgian languages—of which Hungarian is the most important—make up the other, which includes several still spoken in the northern areas of the Soviet Union. The first Hungarians probably lived on the southern slopes of the Ural mountains, and moved westward across the Russian steppes during the fifth century. Linguistic evidence suggests that they came into contact with Turkic and Iranian groups before finally conquering the Carpathian basin, where the nomadic tribes settled in the ninth century. The name of this people and language, in their own tongue, is *Magyar*. (The English word "Hungarian" is derived from the German, which has roots in the medieval Latin "Hungarus.") To my ear the language has a rich, rough, primitive sound, in part caused by the stress pattern of pronouncing individual words with an emphasis on the first syllable, although this emphasis is modified in speaking a phrase. You can hear this distinctively Hungarian rhythm in the music of Bartók and Kodály. Other tonal elements include the unusual combination of consonants such as *cs* (pronounced ch, as in church), *ny* (gn, as in cognac), *sz* (s, as in sun), *zs* (s, as in sugar), and *gy* (d, as in dry), along with varied vowel sounds. (In Hungarian, accent marks do not indicate stress but rather a change in the sound of the letter itself.)

When I first began memorizing the conjugations of Hungarian verbs I felt overwhelmed by one of the main peculiarities of the language, that each verb has two different sets of conjugations, depending on whether or not it has a direct object. In other words the conjugation is determined not by the subject alone, but also by the object, and whether it is specific or general. (Some verbs are only intransitive, with one conjugation.) The problem, as Edmund Wilson succinctly noted, is that "the Hungarian idea of what is specific and what is general does not quite correspond with ours." I began writing out lists of verbs, in my old study-hall fashion,

thinking that I would solve this problem by learning the endings of new verbs, expanding my vocabulary at the same time. It seemed a good idea until I came up against further peculiarities. There are not only a seemingly endless number of irregular verbs, but verb endings change in relation to the *sound* of the root of the verb, whether it has a dark (back) sound or a light (front) sound. My Hungarian teacher took one look at the page of conjugations I'd carefully written out and said that I was trying to learn by a paradigm, and not globally, not idiomatically, which is the way she teaches. I had to learn to give up my desire to control in order to master even the simplest sentence.

This is where it helps to have a sympathetic teacher. Magda, in her late sixties, has the broad, high cheek-bones I associate with Hungarians of a Calvinist background (like my father's family), a generous smile, and lively eyes full of well-wishing. As I came to know her I wasn't entirely surprised to learn that she had been married only five years before, when she moved to Canada from Nice. That smile belongs to a happy newlywed. A gifted linguist who knows ten languages, and often uses examples from literature or opera libretti to illustrate a point, she has taught Hungarian and French at several universities in Europe, and, more recently, in Toronto. (During our lessons she often falls into French, and the directions on the exercises she gives me are also in French, adding another dimension that has charmed me.) When I mentioned Istvan Déak and other Hungarian names in connection with Edmund Wilson, Magda began to reminisce about Déak's sister, a girlhood friend. This can all be pretty imposing as I stumble along, forgetting verb endings, but Magda is one of the most encouraging teachers I've ever known.

Still, language drill has to be done alone. My frustration came into focus one evening while I visited friends whose son, a month short of his second birthday, had yet to begin talking. We assured ourselves that Marc would speak when he was ready to, for it was clear that he listened, understood us, and could make many of his desires known, although he sometimes turned a splendid shade of red when language—or his lack of it—failed him. Alone, with his toys, Marc yattered away happily in a system of his own. (Many of the numerous books about language development have discussed the difference between first- and second-language learning, which I'm not equating; there are, however, common elements.) At least, I told my friends, Marc wouldn't have to learn two

conjugations for every verb. Yet Hungarian children pick these up naturally, and will use the correct one, even if they can't explain why. Being surrounded by a language makes a big difference, but any adult learning a foreign language in his own culture can't create another environment. Then what to do? Watching Marc play I saw that my own solution corresponded to something he did naturally. I had to learn to play with the language, and to value the play for itself. This is one of the best surprises learning a language can offer.

I began by labelling unlined file cards with a Hungarian word on one side and the English equivalent on the other, making flash cards that could be shuffled to add a random element to my language practice. In no time I was approaching this growing pile with the enthusiasm I've seen on the faces of people who love crossword puzzles. In addition to the file cards, I purchased a small, portable tape recorder so that I could use it anywhere, as the mood struck. My tendency is to stay close to the written word, and I knew I had to overcome it, or at least break the habit for a while, in order to deal with the sounds that are uniquely Hungarian. At this stage I wasn't concerned about perfecting an accent, but I did want to be able to make myself understood. Magda had recorded the lessons she'd written out for me, leaving enough time after each sentence for me to repeat it. Unfortunately the tape recorder seemed like an enemy, showing up my mistakes, my faltering attempts to speed up recitations without forgetting how Hungarian vowels are pronounced, and as I sat down to practise aloud, I felt like a child with unwanted homework.

Once you break through that space of resistance to studying a new language, which is a recurring experience, the pleasure in the work, the work as play, is great. But the resistance keeps returning. By the end of the day I was usually so filled with the details of my job, with other people's words, that I had little energy for anything that interested me *if* I turned my attention to it at once. The first step was to acknowledge resistance, so that I could enjoy the act of practising conjugations. As I learned to do this more successfully I came away from practising with a heightened awareness.

Sitting down to my Hungarian time, I enjoy the sensuous aspect of learning the language. Flash cards for review are crisply white and unlined so that each word floats on its own, and I can take pleasure in its foreign-ness, its shape, sound, and meaning. (One friend claims that I like

foreign movies because they have subtitles and I love reading.) However, it's a big step from words to sentences, to remembering the right word without cards. If I think of this at the start of a practice session, it's easy to be discouraged. Instead, as I move a card from the top of the pile to the bottom, I enjoy the sensation. Perhaps I'll make several piles, one for words vaguely recognized, another for those known well, a third for the ones I haven't yet learned to spell. A child intently playing with blocks? The comparison is not unfair. In this transition from the day to the language, I'm overcoming resistance. Why should this be so difficult? Perhaps for the reason that our culture prefers shopping and romance (which inevitably leads back to shopping) to learning, for learning something new can be radical, even dangerous, when it makes you question the assumptions of your world.

After the flashcards, the tape recorder—first with a written text, then without. As sentence patterns start to take shape, words connect with each other. The problems they pose—all those suffixes and prefixes that dominate Hungarian, an agglutinated language where the suffix is all—keep my attention on edge. After the recorder, my notebooks, reviving memories of elementary school. There are three of them, each with a different-colored cover. One is for notes made during lessons, another for exercises and questions that come up as I study, the third for English translations of the texts that my teacher has written out. Three may seem unnecessary, but there is satisfaction in moving from one to the other. These stacks of paper become the physical equivalent of my Hungarian time: along with books of translations, dictionaries, grammars, histories and biographies, they are my Hungarian things. Contrary to the impression language courses give, language learning is not simply cerebral.

The sounds of Hungarian have always been comforting to me. My grandparents, who lived in the top half of our duplex, spoke it with my parents whenever they wanted to discuss something I shouldn't overhear, or late at night when they talked of "the old country." So Hungarian naturally became associated with mystery and adult secrets. Since then I've seen virtually all the Hungarian movies that make it to North America, and the sounds of the language still hold mystery. As I gained some familiarity with words, with those sounds, phrases my grandmother once used began coming up like fragments remembered from a dream.

Often I had no idea what they meant. "*Mit csinálsz*" was one, and Magda smiled when I told her that Grandma used to say it often when she cared for me while my mother worked. "Write it phonetically," Magda suggested. *Mit*, I knew, came from *mi* (what) with the *t* ending of the accusative. *Csinálsz* had the *sz* verb ending of the second person familiar, and in this case the ending of the indefinite tense. With the root of the verb—*csinál*—now isolated, I combined "what" and "you" in a good guess: "What are you doing?" There are other such phrases, some that I'll never repeat to Magda—my grandparents had a volatile marriage.

After attending a symphony concert one Saturday night I anticipated trying my newly-acquired past tense on Magda. I meant to say "*Szombat hallottam egy koncertet*" ("Saturday I heard a concert") but I was unsure of the word *koncert*, because Hungarian has very few crossover words, so I quickly thought of the word *muzsikat*, a crossover I was certain of, but out came *macskat* in its place. Magda looked surprised. I'd said, "Saturday I heard the cat." I'm slowly getting used to this sort of thing, and to the fact that it will be a while before I'm reading the writers I want to. With books by Margit Kaffka and Zsigmond Móricz on my shelves, right now I'm making do with Éva Janikovszky's *Ha én felnőt volnék* (If I Were Grownup)—one of the classics of Hungarian children's literature. "*Minden gyerek tudja, még a legkisebb is, hogy rossznak lenni sokkal mulatságosabb, mint jónak lenni,*" it begins, as I read the first page aloud to practise my pronunciation. Or: "Every child knows—even the youngest one—that it's more amusing to be bad than good."

What I could never have guessed from the start is the bonus of learning a new language: it allows you to block out the world. Because a language demands time, it demands allegiance, but it returns the compliment. No matter how often we remind ourselves that language shapes us—the way we see, what we feel, what we expect of life, and of ourselves—there's nothing like a foreign word for a familiar one to bring us up short. String together enough of them and you suddenly face the arbitrariness of your own culture, and your place in it. The desire for escape (my imaginary hut, blooming apricot trees and gambolling goats) is as old as the first written books we have. That language can help us do this should come as no surprise, although a regular diet of newspapers and magazines, and memos and reports, not to mention whatever books

we do read, goes a long way to anaesthetizing us. Sometimes we need to escape from our own words.

Of course I'm describing my own experience, and can't assume that others will share this enthusiasm for a new language. Which may be why Edmund Wilson's experience interests me—I feel a kind of comradeship.

Wilson died in 1972, and Mary Pcolar in 1986. Her son Edward, who still lives in upstate New York, remembers Wilson, and his mother's claim that he knew no Hungarian when they met. She took pride in the fact that eventually it was one of the seven languages in which he was fluent. While Wilson's fluency with languages has sometimes been questioned—particularly by Vladimir Nabokov, who criticized his Russian, and by Mary McCarthy, Wilson's second wife, who observed that he could read but not speak foreign languages—fluency isn't the point here. What matters to me is Wilson's interest in languages, and the effort he made to learn and appreciate them.

Upstate was published the year before Wilson died and remains his last word on learning Hungarian, or any new language. I can only conjecture about its meaning to him, although he does make connections between the brooding landscape of Hungary's greatest modern poet, Endre Ady, and his own: "I purposefully had Mary read with me Ady's wonderful winter poem, so full of the terror and mystery of a wild Hungarian forest, *Az Eltévedt Lovas*, which reminded me rather of upstate New York. I did not mention this, but when we afterwards drove to Glenfield, she spoke of the resemblance herself, as we approached the Adirondacks, in the bleak and misty landscape beneath a completely ashen sky. . . ."

A language can lead to other places—to another culture, its sounds, its history, its writers, its heart. Unlike my small, clean hut, it is not merely a temporary escape, a holiday, but a place to live in. How odd that we're content to spend our lives with school learning, almost frozen in time. A new language is about all of life—youth and joy and love, and death and change. No wonder that at sixty-five Edmund Wilson was ready to start another. Learning Hungarian took him back into his own world, which he saw anew. I would like it to do the same for me.