Eurozine News Item

Public debate: "Dilemma '89. My father was a communist"

The first in the Eurozine debate series "Europe talks to Europe" took place at the Collegium Budapest on 29 September in collaboration with Eurozine partner Magyar Lettre Internationale. Slovak author and journalist Martin M. Simecka met Hungarian architect, former politician and political dissident László Rajk to discuss the legacy of communism both as family history and as public issue. The result: a riveting discussion about "Dilemma '89".

Both Rajk's and Simecka's fathers were members of the Communist Party from the first hour. László Rajk sr. joined the Party in the 1930s, fought in the Spanish Civil War and during WWII was one of the few Hungarian communists to have stayed to resist fascism on home soil. Milan Simecka, who belonged to a slightly younger generation, joined the Communist Party under circumstances that were "entirely typical" in the leftist, pro–Soviet climate of post-war Czechoslovakia.

Both men were later persecuted by the communists: László Rajk sr. was executed in the Rákosi show trials in 1948 and Milan Simecka was expelled from the Party in 1968 and imprisoned in the 1980s. Martin Simecka suffered directly for his father's "crime" and was excluded from higher education, while László Rajk jr. spent the first five years of his life in an orphanage. Later, János Kádár joked that the only thing that prevented him arresting Rajk jr. was his hesitance at "killing a man with the same name twice".

Nevertheless, questions remain about both fathers' part in communist repressions. As Martin Simecka said: "It was hard to ask someone who had been imprisoned what it was like being a communist. It took me twenty years to understand that I didn't understand what had happened in the 1950s." This observation might apply to society as a whole: while there is large body of literature on and by the dissident generation, an equivalent literature about the communist past does not exist.

László Rajk noted that the failure to deal with the communist past is not an exclusively eastern European phenomenon: what about the western '68ers who waved their little red books? Simecka stressed that it isn't a matter of apologizing, rather of what really happened. "But is it the truth you want or more than that?", Simecka was asked. His reply: "It's about giving the younger generation a chance not to repeat the mistakes of the past."

A full text based on the discussion will appear in Eurozine soon.
More on the series *Europe talks to Europe*, a collaboration with the ERSTE Foundation

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