9. Endings

Berlin Wall Came Down*

Back on November 9, 1989, I lived in Auburn, Alabama. On that morning I looked at the front page of my daily paper, and to my amazement, a cut-out map was shown on the front page with the name "Nickelsdorf" in big letters above a dot indicating a little town in Austria, about seven miles from the Hungarian border.

I was amazed because in 1953, in mid-October, I escaped from Hungary at that spot, leaving behind one-half of my family in order to meet the other half in the West. I was smuggled out of there by a professional, someone the American press would later deprecatingly call a "flesh peddler." I have never forgotten his good works!

The newspaper explained that the Hungarian government did something extraordinary. Some East Germans who came to Hungary wanted to visit their families in West Germany, and for the first time the Hungarian government permitted this, contrary to all expectations, allowing them to leave through Austria.

That was the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union's rule over Eastern Europe. It ended with the eventual demolition of that gross symbol of Soviet tyranny, the Berlin Wall.

The Iron Curtain, as it was dubbed by Winston Churchill, had turned out to be an embarrassment for Soviet socialism. It was a dividing line between what the Soviets

had convinced themselves would be the haven of humanity, in contrast to the decrepit, decadent, and, yes, impoverished West that their leadership had been desperately denouncing for all sorts of reasons for over seventy years.

Soviet socialism was established because of Lenin's belief that one could hurry up history. Karl Marx, Lenin's philosophical teacher, had believed that after capitalism had run its course, socialism would emerge and, after that, communism would be reached as the final stage of humanity's development. All this was supposed to happen because of historical necessity, inevitably.

But there was a problem. Russia had never experienced capitalism, only bits and pieces of it here and there. So how could the Soviet Union be the leader of the march toward socialism, and after that, communism?

Marx gave a clue, in his preface to the Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto*. He said that if the change to socialism in Russia were exported to other parts of the world—parts where capitalism had taken hold—then the impossible could be achieved, and Russia would become the next step toward communism.

Out of this came the efforts of the Soviet leaders to export their socialist system to all parts of the world, including much of Europe. Their first step was to make the Poles, Hungarians, East Germans, Rumanians, Czechs, Bulgarians, Albanians, and Yugoslavians all into dutiful socialists. The next step would then be to subvert the countries of Africa, Latin America, and even Western Europe. But to get this going the Eastern Europeans had to be cut off from Western Europe.

It is not clear whether the Soviet leaders realized early on that the Marxist story of humanity's progress toward communism was a ruse or whether most of them believed

in it. In any case, they certainly saw in this story a way to secure for themselves the tyrannical powers that they had been wielding over millions of people for several decades, seven decades in the USSR and four decades in the rest of Europe.

In 1961 there was ample evidence that contact with the West would lead Eastern Europeans to lose any semblance of confidence in the Soviet myth of the march toward a prosperous communist society. That is when the Berlin Wall was built, as a way to keep East Germans from finding out how miserable their fate was. A lot of East Germans were fooled, but hundreds were not, many of them risking, and some losing, their lives in attempts to climb over the wall and seek refuge in the West.

Finally, once it became abundantly clear that Soviet socialism was a complete flop, no measure of credibility was left for the countries behind the Iron Curtain. And it was the Hungarian officials who seemed to have recognized this first. Mikhail Gorbachev, the last tyrant of the Evil Empire, contributed, of course, because in a desperate effort to revitalize the socialist experiment, he started glasnost, the policy of easing-up on government regimentation of the Soviet economy. As soon as he did this, he could kiss the socialist dream goodbye. Without the strong arm of government, socialism becomes a hopeless dream for anyone who has lived through some of it.

But it was the Hungarian government's policy of finally recognizing the insanity of keeping German families apart that precipitated the collapse of the Soviet empire. The Berlin Wall's demolition was the punctuation to that momentous decision.

Many in the West are upset that once the wall came tumbling down, the Soviet region didn't immediately

become a haven of capitalist development and of other free institutions. This is like expecting a dysfunctional family to be able to recover immediately after a tragedy awakens its members to how badly they have been managing their lives.

The simple fact is that it will take several decades before the people of the former Soviet empire will recoup. They were injured in hundreds of different ways, and some of those who survived the ordeal have not even begun to get back on their feet.

Still, now, once the Soviet empire has decomposed, there is a chance for the people there to start living as free men and women, to organize their lives as they see fit, and perhaps even to prosper. To do all this, much needs to be accomplished—most important, a legal infrastructure must be set up that firmly establishes and protects the principles of private property rights and the integrity of contracts. Once that is achieved, the gradual rebuilding of the region can begin.

For now it is enough to simply celebrate ten years of life without the Soviet tyrants. In anyone's book that should be a promising beginning.

Post-Communist Traumas East and West

Irvington-on-Hudson (New York) Freeman, May 1994

> *[We] cannot say that democratic institutions reflect a moral reality and that tyrannical regimes do not reflect one, that tyrannies get something wrong that democratic societies get right.*
>
> Professor Richard Rorty, *New Republic*, July 1, 1991

During an international conference on political theory, several of us were sitting in a restaurant in Tallinn, Estonia. Among us was a participant from Bucharest, Romania, a young woman, who listened as some from the West poked fun at the inefficiency of the Russians, who still have a significant presence in the Baltic countries and who happened to be running this establishment. We noted the drabness of the decor, the ineptness of the help, the slowness of the service, and reminisced about the even worse olden days when the gray-looking Russians who dominated the Communist culture ran roughshod over everyone in sight.

Suddenly we saw our friend from Bucharest in tears. She apologized but was unable to keep herself from sobbing. We were stunned—we didn't know what we had done to upset her. We all searched our minds for what we might have said but could not come up with a sensible answer. In a while, she calmed down a bit and told us.

All this amusing banter called to our friend's mind not only what she had been living with all her life but what in her country is still largely the case—the complete control of a Soviet-style bureaucracy over society. She then went on

to recount, in halting English and tearfully, how the daily lives of her family and friends had been trapped in the abyss that so many in the West championed as the promising wave of the future. She gave example after example of how people had suffered, from moment to moment—how every ounce of joy and pleasure, never mind genuine happiness, had been rendered impossible and inconceivable for them. She said that people simply lost the will to live, that they could not even smile, not to mention laugh heartily, and that the smallest matters, such as the way in which parents played and talked with their children, had suffered from this totalitarian impact.

It is often only when one finds oneself facing the facts directly, inescapably, that one can appreciate their meaning. This is especially true about facts that so many people would just as soon obscure with clever rationalizations.

In the West, especially in American newspapers, academic journals, and college classrooms, the Soviet empire is nearly forgotten. People everywhere are talking about why there isn't some major economic boom in response to this fall. A *Business Week* editorial remarked, "Communism has been vanquished in much of the globe, the victim of its own failure to deliver a decent living to its citizens under its rule. Yet capitalism in the industrialized nations is limping along." It is as if "one, two, three," and our world will simply put forty to seventy years of bloody dictatorship and command economy out of mind and bounce back as if nothing had happened.

Assessing the Damage

The damage inflicted by the Communist reign is not nearly well enough understood. It is certainly no longer treated as

a big deal. What has taken its place as a vital item of concern is just how bad conditions are in the wake of the efforts to live without communism, without the mighty Soviet state imposing its warped vision of human life on all the colonies within its sphere of impact. The question that seems to titillate the interest of many people is why the recovery is so slow, if it was needed in the first place. The question on the minds of many prominent journalists, for example, is: "What should be substituted for the admittedly harsh and clumsy form of socialism, in the wake of the evident unworkability of the freedoms that the people gained after the fall?"

Despite all the talk about free markets and free institutions in the newly liberated countries of Eastern Europe, the intellectual consensus among political theorists and scientists seems to be that some middle way is needed between socialism and capitalism. There is little encouragement for a truly vibrant capitalist system, either from our politicians and political theorists or from the voices of moral leadership.

Just consider what the word on this is from the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Angelo Sodano: "Capitalism is no less dangerous [than communism] because of its basic materialism and the unbridled consumerism and selfishness it encourages" (*La Stampa*, December 28, 1992). Rather than the truly productive capitalist system, the preferred choice seems to be social democracy, the welfare state, or communitarianism, a hybrid of liberalism and socialism, with the emphasis not on the value of the freedom of the individual, including freedom to engage in production and trade, but on the value of individuals' responsibilities to the community, not unlike the creed preached by Marx and his followers. The new vision involves a system in which free

trade is here and there "permitted" but only under the watchful eyes of planners and regulators, who know just when to limit people's liberty good and hard.

The one system that gets the least play as the proper candidate to replace the tyranny just overthrown is free-market capitalism or, as the Europeans call it, classical liberalism. No, that would unleash all the beasts. Such freedom cannot work and must not be tried, lest anarchy and rapaciousness break out all over. Look what freedom's promise has already unleashed on Bosnia-Herzegovina. Look how greed and profiteering has already spread all over the old Soviet sphere. So the proper answer is not to let it happen—some people must become the stern tamers of the rest, if we could just quickly decide who is clever and dependable enough to take the reins of power.

Not only, then, is there little left of true capitalism and free-market economies in the West, but there is little chance of such a system taking over where Communist dictators failed. In addition to this, few people in the West seem to fully appreciate just how horrible the Soviet experiment really was and how difficult it is to recover from it. There are no expressions of earnest mea culpa anywhere. Publications such as the *Nation*, the *New Republic*, the *Progressive*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the hundreds of other more scholarly outlets or related media do not spend much time acknowledging that their different degrees of softness on communism, their thesis of the moral equivalency of capitalism and communism, and their subtle but evident apologies for the Lenins, Stalins, Brezhnevs, and others in the Soviet debacle may have had a bit to do with the horrors the people were subjected to and with their current difficulties in recovering from these horrors, start-

ing a new life, and recapturing some measure of hopefulness and the will to live and flourish.

I was rereading *Naming Names* (New York: Viking, 1980), the book about the blacklist period in America during the 1950s by Victor Navasky, editor of the *Nation* (which is still proudly championing socialism with some kind of human face for all countries). In it Navasky made clear that he thought that despite the brutality of Soviet Marxism, there was something morally noble about the system because its intent was to help the poor and powerless. I also read some passages ridiculing the Russian-born American novelist Ayn Rand, who once claimed that a movie that depicted Russians smiling was a travesty, a sly propaganda piece, since no ordinary Russian could be presented in such a way without a gross distortion of the truth—it would be comparable to depicting Jews in concentration camps having a good time playing volleyball. Not that this may never have happened, but that highlighting such a scene in a work of fiction amounts to a vile distortion. Navasky and his ilk, of course, scoffed at this and still do.

A Complex, Painful Ordeal

But that is just what our Romanian friend was telling us about the millions and millions of victims of the Soviet terror, which only a lunatic could imagine to have been motivated by compassion and care. What is worse, today many of these same naïve reporters of the meaning and effect of Soviet socialism still do not appreciate just how complex and painful an ordeal it is to attempt to recover from it all.

People are not simply changing from one game to another when they finally are able to leave the Soviet system

behind. They are undergoing recovery from extensive and prolonged injury to their whole being. They and everyone they knew and loved were beaten and derided and terrorized by thugs for decades on end. When they are finally left alone, they are expected to, as the song says, just pick themselves up, brush themselves off, and start all over again—with cheer in their hearts.

We are seeing some extremely painful recovery as well as relapses in the lives of those who were the victims of the Soviet experiment that so many of our comfortable intellectuals watched with vile neglect. We will see normal, imperfect human beings undergo a slow convalescence or stand around hesitatingly coping with new problems and nearly forgotten ones as well.

For the many people who have given their support to socialism and communism over the years—if only by not being brutally honest about them—on such grounds as that, well, these systems were motivated by compassion for the poor and downtrodden, the failure to see all this is blatant hypocrisy. The victims of the Soviet vision of human life deserve compassion and caring, and yet all they seem to be getting is a callous disregard for their plight and the quick judgment that they are, after all, unable to handle freedom, aren't they? What the yearning for self-justification will not permit some people to do in the face of the gravest of human tragedies!

Bulgarian Malaise

Orange County (California) Register, September 25, 1996

It was on August 25 that I tried to cross the border between Romania and Bulgaria, after I landed in Bucharest and took a cab to reach Ruse, the nearby Bulgarian border town, to meet a friend there. I had planned to rent a car. I had been assured by fax that I could take the rental car across the border, but when I landed at the airport, this proved to be false. So I took a cab, with a driver who spoke a bit of English and was confident he could get me to Ruse without any problems.

After a forty-five-minute drive, we came to the border. I was completely unprepared, on a Sunday afternoon, for the incredibly long line of vehicles that awaited us. I had asked my cabby, but he assured me there'd be no wait on a Sunday. The cars, trucks, buses, and every other kind of road transport one could imagine lined up to form a standing caravan of about seventy-five vehicles, with the people standing around or sitting on top of them, biding their time, without any apparent progress made in crossing the border, over the Danube on Friendship Bridge into Bulgaria.

The most conspicuous element of the scene was the constant milling about of shirtsleeved officials, collecting bribes for (mostly false) promises to let a vehicle move up a bit, to get in front of the one ahead. My cabby told me repeatedly that I needed to pay, that without bribing several of these officials in their blue shirts we would never get ahead. I, in turn, had the impression that if I paid one bribe,

I would be sunk—they would then be able to do with me whatever they wanted, since I had committed a crime and would be forever vulnerable to being manipulated. So I resisted.

After twenty minutes of getting a feel for the situation, I decided to get out of the car, walk to the front of the line, and do something, whatever, to try to move on. In the little wooden building, I saw, through a window, one uniformed man checking through countless passports, with seven others standing outside biding their time, chain-smoking, while the crowd waited patiently for something to happen.

I approached one of the idle officers and implored him to let me cross right then. He took my passport and disappeared into the building, only to emerge in ten minutes followed by a stocky officer with my passport in hand. By this time, my cabby had managed to buck the line and reach me, and I was soon back sitting in the cab next to him. The stocky official looked into the driver-side window and shook his head. "Impossible," he said, "you cannot cross the border now. It is impossible." He went on in this vein for another five minutes or so. And then, giving me back my passport, he waved us on across the now-raised barrier.

We hightailed it toward Bulgaria. But I couldn't resist looking back, checking to see if some kind of mass protest had erupted in the wake of what had just happened.

There was no movement. The hundreds of drivers and passengers were just standing around, eating sandwiches, drinking sodas, chatting, laughing, paying no heed to the tall, gray-haired foreigner who had bullied himself across a border they had been waiting for three hours, and would continue to wait for another two or four hours, to cross. It was just life as they knew it—it all depended on the caprice of the border guards in whose hands their fate lay.

This episode was followed by repeated examples of people showing complete subservience to official ineptitude and inefficiency. At railway stations no information was forthcoming from those charged with the responsibility of providing it—instead, these officials would look at those who sought their help with annoyance and just shake their heads to indicate that no information was forthcoming, not just then. The attitude was clear: "There is nothing in it for me if I help you; I can decide whether I will or not, whatever my official position may seem to promise." But no one protested—I was alone in showing any resistance to such widespread official phlegmatism.

Bureaucrats in Bulgaria seem to see themselves as autocrats, not as professionals with some kind of responsibility to serve the public. Even after six years of post-Communist life, the country is still suffocating from the attitudes people learned during forty years of socialist regimentation. There is no sign of "the customer is king," far from it. And no one seems to demand it, either. Even private shops are filled with employees who seem to look on themselves as doing customers a favor by selling them bread, butter, postcards, or dinner.

With only a few exceptions—involving rare folks who have managed to rescue their spirits from the morass of apathy and hopelessness—the country is filled with people who do not want to fight for anything, who do not expect their lives to be improved by making any effort to do so. Their fate, they seem to think, is sealed.

Socialism kills more than economic growth—indeed, the reason it kills that and a lot more is that it destroys the souls of citizens. From such destruction it will take a good while to recover.

U.S. Congress v. the INS: In the Matter of Elian Gonzales*

This case has gotten me somewhat riled up because when I was fourteen, I was smuggled out of Communist Hungary illegally. My mother, who lived in Hungary with her husband and two daughters, both ten years my junior, was in on the plans, but later she had to pretend not to have known anything about it, otherwise she would have been put in prison.

Once I reached Vienna safely, I wrote her a postcard apologizing for running away from home so that she could have some "evidence" to show the government goons hounding her that she had had nothing to do with my escape. Still, for ten years or more after that, once or twice a year the police would call her downtown to question her about my successful escape. She had to deny knowing anything about it and pretend to want me back. When suddenly the hounding stopped, she concluded that the person who had her file had probably died or retired.

Now, no one such case is exactly like another—these are exactly the kind of cases used to test rules, laws, moral principles, and so forth. They are exceptional, and no easy, straightforward solution to them is possible. Which is why it is curious that the Clinton administration refuses to approve of a court settlement in which precedent, pertinent testimony, rules of evidence, and the rest would get a close

hearing before judgment is made, and the boy's fate decided.

In several media forums there have been interesting exchanges between Republicans and Democrats, both of whom disavow any intention to politicize the case. But in fact New York's Democratic congressman Charlie Rangle flatly and unhesitatingly supported the Clinton-Reno-INS decision to send back Elian. The Republicans I have heard, in contrast, have been advancing several arguments that, put together, make a good case not so much for keeping the boy here as for leaving the decision about him to be reached by a court of law.

Now when there are serious disputes about rights in a free society, this is where government is supposed to have a role, not in banning drugs, saving forests, or putting up monuments. Dispute resolution is unique because although sometimes the parties commit themselves ahead of time to abide by what an arbitration board decides, often only force brings them to the same table. The fact that rights seem to have been violated makes such force justified when ordinarily it would not be. This kind of legal force is supposed to be used with extreme care—due process—so that everyone's rights are closely guarded, and the most impartial, rational decision is reached.

This is in contrast to a bureaucratic decision, made by highly partisan agency heads, who usually follow party interests. They are often committed to serving special purposes, even as they insistently proclaim that they are serving the public interest. That is the nature of the welfare state and of nearly all institutions associated with it, so what Clinton, Janet Reno, and the INS are doing here is nothing unusual.

Because of the adversarial system of jurisprudence, the

courts are likely to be more fair and just. Each side gets to air its case, which will not happen if the decision is left to some department of a politicized government administration. But Reno and her crew at the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the INS sing the tune of their boss, Bill Clinton. That is natural.

Clinton has a history of pragmatism about ideals, but where he does embrace them, they lean toward the Left. He has little serious commitment to values but does favor the worldview of those who sympathize with Fidel Castro's efforts to make an egalitarian country out of Cuba. As to the rest, whatever works for extending his power and, now, his wife's, is the usual motivating principle at the Clinton White House.

As to the future of six-year-old Elian Gonzales—whether Communist Cuba is where he should be sent to grow up or whether he should be allowed to stay in the United States (where clearly his mother and probably even his father want him to live)—that is of no great consequence to Mr. Clinton. Why should it be? How can such considerations get him what he is after, political influence, especially with the more outspoken ideologues in his liberal Democratic political culture (including Al Gore)?

While Republicans—who also have their knee-jerk responses to public affairs—might be expected to just want to sock it to Fidel Castro, it looks to me as if their position is more measured, level-headed, and consistent with the judicial philosophy of a free society. They have proposed that the case be subjected to a careful, thorough investigation under the scrutiny of judges and opposing attorneys, witnesses, and so on, and will go with whatever the result. That is how a tough choice needs to be made, not by having partisan bureaucrats decide from high above.

An Old Moral Blindness Revisited*

The flap about awarding Elia Kazan a special Academy Award last Sunday raises some issues that should not be forgotten. Kazan is a Hollywood ex-Communist who testified before the House Unamerican Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings when that congressional body was making ill-conceived efforts to counter the influence of communism in American culture. He named names.

No one can, I believe, offer a good defense of the HUAC and its efforts. It is the quintessential feature of a free society that people do not get punished for what they believe, however awful their beliefs are. (This, by the way, is something that many who condemned the HUAC's actions in the 1950s are finding unobjectionable now, when hate crimes have become a target of left-wing legislation! If Communists—who, after all, supported Stalinist Soviet Russia and advocated the overthrow of the U.S. government—ought not be hounded for what they believe and feel, neither should racists and others who hate with a fierce passion.) Unless there is clear evidence that someone or some group is embarking on violence against others, including members of the government, no official counteractions should be taken.

Yet, just as with those who seek to punish hatred—by making a hate crime something more heinous than an ordinary crime—those who wanted to punish Communists and their sympathizers can be viewed with some measure of

appreciation for their eagerness. Communists, after all, supported a regime and its worldwide imperialist efforts, which were just as bad, if not worse, than the Nazis'. They deserve no praise for their "integrity," any more than a Nazi or a member of the KKK does. Communists were out-and-out enemies of the American way of life of individualism, free enterprise, private property rights, and the rest.

But there are those who disagree. Among them Victor Navasky is perhaps most prominent, the author of *Naming Names*, a book that discussed with great moral indignation the alleged evils of turning in Communists and fellow travelers. Navasky is also the editor of the *Nation*, the most openly left-wing and widely read weekly magazine in this country.

Navasky has argued that one reason turning against Communists is bad, while turning against Nazis is good, is that Communists were inspired by moral ideals. Among these is the improvement of the working class, helping the poor, rejecting the economic class system, and so on. He admits—rather perfunctorily, for my money—that the Soviet Communists used evil methods to try to achieve these admirable goals, but he urges us to judge Communists and ex-Communists in America and elsewhere by these goals, not the methods they were often duped into supporting.

Navasky went around before the Oscars condemning Kazan, as did a bunch of ex-Communist directors and writers who had lost career opportunities after being identified as Communists or ex-Communists. But his attempt to exonerate these folks just will not wash.

To start with, one can associate every vicious movement with some decent objectives. The Nazis, for example, championed clean and healthful living and the upgrading of the human species, as many people do who are enamored with

health, athletics, sports, nutrition, and so forth. Even the Communists want to bring about a human race that is free of foibles and bad habits. There is really no difference between the two ideologies at all. And they share each other's unabashed use of the most vicious means for achieving their goals. One size fits all is their motto, and they are willing to shove it down everyone's throat.

The "ratting" done by Elia Kazan was no different from someone ratting on others who commit robbery, murder, rape or on those who want to cover up such crimes and aid and abet their perpetrators. Today's advocates of making hate a crime are plenty happy when they find some skinhead or ex-militia member turn against an old buddy, because if the activity is vicious enough, turning those in who engage in it is something commendable.

Elia Kazan's mistake was only to have accepted the legitimacy of our federal government's technique for trying to combat communism. He did nothing wrong when he named names. Nor do those who turn in Mafia operatives do anything wrong. Indeed, that is often the only decent thing they can do after having cooperated with the organization's criminal conduct.

So the issue really isn't about being a snitch. We should like anyone who snitches against folks who are hurting others. It is only when we consider the activities innocent or harmless that turning someone in is the wrong kind of ratting. A police informant who lets us know about a robber or murderer is a good guy. One who turns in prostitutes or junkies is a bad guy.

Kazan wasn't informing on a bunch of innocent, persecuted people but on supporters of Stalin who, like Hitler, was a mass murderer. To show all this sympathy for those

in Hollywood who gave aid and comfort to Stalin betrays a warped sense of political values.

Elia Kazan was right not to have acquiesced to calls that he should apologize. It is he who is owed an apology for having been vilified for a minor transgression while trying to ferret out some of the really bad blood in Hollywood.

Glasnost in Chile?

Chronicles of Culture (Rockford, Illinois), August 1989

Pinochet is getting no credit for it. Yet at the same time, General Secretary (and now also President) Gorbachev's policies are being hailed as major breakthroughs, departures from the previous (Brezhnev) era. These policies are thought to hold out great promise for the people of the Soviet Union if they can only succeed. Glasnost (openness) and perestroika (reconstruction) are widely praised by commentators as important moves to advance the Soviet Union toward a better society. There are some skeptics, of course—David Slater (in the *New Republic*) doubts that glasnost can work. But on the whole, writers in the *Nation*, the *New Yorker*, and other prominent publications express basic respect for Mikhail Gorbachev's intentions and efforts.

In contrast, there is no one who likes General Pinochet. The question is, why? While he has been a ruthless opponent of political freedom in Chile for almost as long as he has been in power, in 1980 he helped forge a new constitution for that country that paves the way to full-scale political democracy. We have just witnessed one result of this constitutional reform—an election in Chile to decide whether Pinochet may serve for another full term or whether he has to step down within a year after his term expires. It looks like the general intends to abide by the outcome, and in March 1990 elections will be held to decide who will govern Chile. Pinochet has also established an

economy in Chile that has led to greater prosperity there than in any other Central and Latin American country. While Chile has pockets of poverty, the country nevertheless has had lower inflation and higher employment than its neighbors.

We do not know what Pinochet will or will not do. He is still in power, and the constitution that gives him that power is far from expressing the will of even the majority of the people, much less protecting the rights of a minority.

What do we know about Gorbachev? He has proposed no change to the Soviet constitution, a document that explicitly prohibits anyone in the Soviet Union from criticizing the Soviet government. The law may not always be enforced, but it is crucial that there is no legal obstacle to invoking it. Has Gorbachev advocated changing the nature of Soviet society? No; he simply regards some earlier policies as following from "distortions of socialism." He has no desire, judging by his own words, to abandon Lenin's "genuine socialism." The means of production in the Soviet Union will continue to be collectively owned and thus exposed to government regimentation. Perestroika may lead the state to relax its regime, but not to abdicate its role as ultimate sovereign. If one recalls that in Marxist socialist theory the primary means of production is human labor, Gorbachev is unambiguously committed to treating Soviet citizens as mere cells in the body of the state. Nor should we lose sight of the fact that Gorbachev was an enthusiastic follower of Brezhnev. His role in the KGB cannot be ignored either.

Of course, Pinochet's partial embracing of capitalism—through his University of Chicago–trained finance minister Herman Buchi, who has recently resigned—does not mean that Chile enjoys a free marketplace, in which everyone's

private property rights are fully acknowledged and respected. Yet at least Pinochet seems to be bent on heading toward that kind of system, one that makes the individual sovereign, not the state.

Why then are American intellectuals so contemptuous of Pinochet but not critical (indeed they are quite welcoming) of Gorbachev? Why would Gore Vidal, for example, praise the Soviet leader so highly—calling one of his speeches the most profound political talk he has ever encountered? (And Vidal is the author of the novel *Lincoln*!) Is it that for most American intellectuals there are no enemies to the left?

Hungary 1990: A Visit to an Abandoned Homeland

Orange County (California) Register, September 30, 1990

In October of 1953 I was smuggled out of Hungary by a professional "flesh peddler," as *Time* magazine referred to them in a 1980 story. I was fourteen years old. Stalin had died in March, and the country was a dreary place, with little hope that the Soviet Union's reign would ever end.

Since that time I have become a nearly full-fledged American—I served in the Air Force, completed study for three degrees (all in philosophy), and made myself a family man as well. I worked hard to shed my connections to the old country, so much so that on the rare occasions when I bumped into other émigré Hungarians, they resented the fact that I spoke fluent English with only the slightest accent and that my Hungarian was rather inept.

Now and then, I ran into Hungarian scholars at international conferences, and I was, therefore, aware of the gradual changes in Hungary's political and cultural climate. Yet it still came as something of a shock that in 1989 Hungary broke with orthodox Soviet hegemonic policy and opened its borders so that East German visitors could escape in droves from the Eastern bloc. When I picked up the newspaper in my driveway one day and saw the map of the Hungarian border regions near Nickelsdorf, Austria, the very same place where my own escape took place almost exactly thirty-five years before, I knew that things were going to be

changing much faster than I had dared to hope, let alone predict.

I don't wish to dwell on the politics of the changes taking place in what used to be the Soviet-bloc countries—that subject is on everyone's mind and fills the pages of magazines, journals, newspapers, and other publications these days. Instead I want to reflect on what it is to experience being given a chance to recover something, one's home roots, including feelings, memories of sights, sounds, images, tastes, and the more subtle features of an atmosphere one has tried so hard to erase from one's brain.

During the last thirty years, I have worked hard on not being tied to my homeland. I felt that it was useless to keep up empty hopes, to dwell on lost chances. I was going to be very positive about my acquisition of a new home. I wanted to become an American—I had read American novels when I was young, and their atmosphere contrasted so starkly with what I had experienced that if the opportunity presented itself, I would jump this ship and board that other, one that seemed clearly to my liking.

Indeed, I went about for much of my life making it clear to myself, through my work as a political philosopher, why leaving Communist Hungary and becoming an American citizen had such attraction for me. Was it merely a personal prejudice? Was I a born bourgeois? Was I elevating an accidental fact of my life into something mythically significant? I had written and edited books—*Human Rights and Human Liberties* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1975) and *The Main Debate: Communism versus Capitalism* (New York: Random House, 1987)—dealing with such issues.

Suddenly, the main reason I had decided to change homelands was evaporating—Hungary seemed to be free again, or getting there slowly. What should I do? I still had

the chance to reconsider, to reexamine, to see if somehow, despite my reasonably successful acclimation to the United States of America, I would not find Hungary much more of a home.

In the spring of 1990, I was invited to lecture in Hungary on political philosophy. The audience would be international, mostly composed of university students from countries previously under Soviet control. I would be able to lecture in English, the official language of the seminars. It fit in my schedule. So I accepted.

In August 1990, I went to Szirak, to the renovated castle there, and spent a week giving lectures and taking in the experience of being back in Hungary. I visited Budapest, one of the world's most attractively laid-out cities, and I met with Hungarian scholars of impeccable (classical) liberal credentials. I was even invited to spend a term teaching in the country. My daughter, Kate, came with me and was shown, by relatives, all the places of my early youth—apartments where I lived, schools I attended, my grandmother's residence, and so on.

It was all a bit too fast for me, I admit. I cannot even say that my thoughts are fully collected now. But my impressions are clear enough.

Hungary, not unlike other countries under Soviet oppression for the last forty years or so, is now emerging from a period of colonial occupation. It is by no means near recovery—the diagnosis of what ails it hasn't even begun. While there is a large influx of Western European tourism and commerce, there is also uncertainty about whether the people of this country can cope with the challenges a relatively free society poses for people. The economy is likely to be transformed into a relatively free market, judging by how well the intellectual community is receiving the advice

of Janos Kornai in his book *The Road to a Free Market* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990). Kornai is professor of economics at both Harvard University and the University of Budapest and has been a student of socialist economies from the mid-1950s. He advises radical reform, not dilly-dallying at all.

Can a country accustomed to the mirages of a static economy such as socialism ready itself for a dynamic market system? And how will people be able to cope with the knowledge that thousands of officials who inflicted the damage to their country will probably retire contentedly to Lake Balaton, experiencing no adverse consequences from their criminal complicity? How will people be able to suffer the fallout of forty years of mismanagement when they know that the culprits are treated with kid gloves, mostly because there would be no great advantage to anyone from meting out the demands of justice?

I was noticing in the eyes of every intelligent Eastern European a sense of fearful anticipation, a plea for prudence on the part of all, a hope for a patient and successful convalescence. Hungary, like most of the other countries in question, will not only have to cope with the damage done to it by socialism and communism. It will also have to cope with leftover problems, unresolved social, cultural, and religious difficulties that are resurfacing everywhere.

A free society is no guarantee of universal happiness—only of the opportunity to strive for such happiness. Tyranny suppresses not only what is good in society but also some of what ails it. And with the reemergence of liberty, all of this will surface again.

I can only wish that the people of Hungary have the will, intelligence, and virtue to remake their country into a thriving culture and not allow it to be crushed by all the adversities that face it. But I know that I am an American, with

my roots in Hungary, my life in America. My adopted homeland has its own troubles, and I have returned to cope with my share of them. I may go to Hungary for visits, even for professional excursions, but I will always return home to America, where my life must be lived as well as possible. I am fortunate, however, that I had the chance to make sure that this was what I wanted to do and that this chance was made possible by the emergence of my original country from a very dark period, one that I can only hope will never be repeated.

A Most Peculiar Nostalgia

Orange County (California) Register, November 25, 2002

Imagine yourself on a plane browsing through the *SkyMall* magazine catalog, finding a nice old U-boat clock shown, with a swastika displayed on it prominently, offered at the reasonable price of $80.00. Or how about a nice hat that proudly carries on its front the Iron Cross of the Third Reich, for a modest $150 or, if made of fine fur, for $450? I am not certain, but I doubt *SkyMall*'s management would be hailed for its sensitivity—a little like illustrating its pages with little Sambo figures from the deep south, isn't it?

Now think of yourself as a refugee from some Soviet-bloc country, as I am and as are millions of Americans, who runs across the clock from a Soviet submarine in *SkyMall* magazine, and a mouton and mink ushankas, promoted as memorabilia from the worst tyranny in human history, offered for us all to wear in good spirits. A bit crass?

But that isn't all. What if National Public Radio offered up some of the wonderful performances of Beethoven or Brahms from, well, the National Socialist Symphony Orchestra of the Third Reich, for its listeners to enjoy performances of great music from the past? Or what if some film festival on, say, a classic movie cable channel were to feature, without comment and as simple film art, the works of some German director who just did what she was told but did it beautifully?

Many of us know well that nothing like that could hap-

pen. The Nazis had no redeeming social value to offer up, period, and quite understandably so. Their regime was so vile, so horrible, so inhumane that any thought of enjoying some part of it, even if in principle distinguishable from what the Nazis as Nazis did, is itself nearly unbearable.

Yet here we are. In thousands of airline backseat pockets around America, people are able to find catalogues advertising memorabilia from the Soviet era, and hundreds of university radio stations, getting their programming from NPR, present to all their loyal, elite listeners classical tunes from the various orchestras of the USSR. What is the not-so-hidden message here, anyway?

Well, for my money, it is that a great many of those people who call the shots for what counts as palatable in recent human history seem to believe that while the Nazis were a categorically nasty lot—never mind that they may have made some movies and played some classical music well enough—the butchers of the Soviet era don't qualify for such total dismissal. And why is this? Because for most of these folks who tell us what counts as culturally palatable, the Soviet era was merely a somewhat rough experiment, a good thing that sadly didn't quite work out.

Stalin, and Lenin before him—and the others who followed, and all their lackeys, all those little helpers of history who carried out the murder of roughly 20 million innocent human beings in the period of about fifty years, with a good deal of moral support from the intellectual and cultural elite of the rest of the globe—were, well, just misguided, off a bit, nothing to get all excited about. In contrast, Hitler and his gang—who were not embarking on launching the international socialist revolution but merely a national socialist program, although they murdered about 6 million Jews and gypsies and homosexuals and others—were clearly, unam-

biguously, and definitely a contemptible lot. They were not aiming for the liberation of the workers of the world as they perpetrated their mass murder, their genocide, so they cannot be embraced in any shape or form. The Soviets, however—well, at any rate, some of them—meant well. And isn't it that thought that counts? It's a crock, of course—the Nazis had some good enough goals, like preserving high culture, reinvigorating Germany, and molding the people into model human beings, a goal shared by many respectable people in history who, however, wouldn't go about getting there on the path the Nazis tried. Both, the Soviets and the Nazis, had some ideals, more or less worthy, but employed means that left those ideals pretty much in total disgrace.

At a recent conference honoring the memory of the philosopher Sidney Hook, a man of the anticommunist Left—a democratic socialist who actually saw Karl Marx as someone who would have been horrified at what the Soviets made of his thought—some erudite folks made no bones about seeing things roughly along those old lines. While, yes, Stalin was a terribly vicious excuse for a human being, to get obsessed with anticommunism, as they thought Hook had been in the latter part of his life, was rather uncouth, not worthy of a serious person. Anyone like Hook, who didn't take Joseph McCarthy and McCarthyism to be the worst thing America has seen in its recent political history, comparable to nothing less than slavery itself, but who thought that McCarthy, though a nuisance, was still relatively small-fry compared to Stalin and his supporters, well, such a person just didn't cut it in the eyes of these politically correct people.

They just will not learn. Maybe their early blindness to just how vicious, how vile the Soviets were makes it difficult for these folks to own up to their misjudgments even now.

The consequence of it may, however, be more serious than lots of folks think: it may encourage a perpetuation of the idea that the Soviet horrors were not much to fret about and that remembering those who stood by the side of these butchers is sort of cute, even nostalgic.