

## George (György) Schöpflin. “I am a European of Hungarian Issue”

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George (György) Schöpflin was born in Budapest on November 24, 1939. His father Gyula, and before him his grandfather Aladar Schöpflin, were distinguished literary critics, his grandfather having been closely connected to the most important and influential literary journal in twentieth century Hungary, *Nyugat*. Their roots were in the Felvidék (Upper Hungary). Aladar was born in Maniga, Upper Hungary, in what is now Slovakia. His grandmother, Iren Maderspach, descended from a family that distinguished itself during the 1848–49 Hungarian Revolution in the defense of the White Church (Feher Templom). His mother, Katalin Eva Schöpflin (née Balazs), was educated in Prague as a family physician.

In Hungary, the Schöpflins were a cultured and refined family whose somewhat left leaning sympathies were generally overlooked by society, although in his youth Gyula joined a student cell of the then–illegal Communist Party, was arrested in 1931 and in 1932 was incarcerated for a time. After his release he worked for the Revai publishing house and then from 1938 to 1944 he worked as a clerk in a textile factory in Budakalasz. He wrote essays and short stories under a pseudonym to avoid embarrassing his father. He studied Hungarian and English literature at Eötvös College, where he delighted in annoying his professor by writing essays on [then] controversial authors such as Aldous Huxley and Virginia Woolf. His articles were published mostly in the communist–connected periodical *Gondolat* (Thought).<sup>1</sup>

Due to his political ties, in 1945, when the post–WWII Rákosi government came into power, Gyula Schöpflin received a position at Hungarian Radio as the program coordinator. In 1948 he was appointed Hungarian envoy to Sweden with the official

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<sup>1</sup> George Gomori, “Gyula Schopflin: Hungarian writer and translator who fled to Britain after an unhappy role in communist politics,” *The Guardian*, June 29, 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2004/jun/30/guardianobituaries.artsobituaries> (accessed June 30, 2022).

title – Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary in Stockholm and Copenhagen, which marked his family’s first step toward a move to the west.

In the last few months of his life, George Schöpflin recounted his earliest memories in a long interview with Péter Tulok of the Nemzeti Emlékezet Bizottsága (Committee of National Remembrance), giving us profound and detailed insight into what it was to be a child during the Siege of Budapest.<sup>2</sup> Prof. Schöpflin recounted that he remembered little before the German occupation of Hungary in March 1944, when he would have been just four and a half years old. He had some memories of the family summering in Nagymaros on the Danube Bend (when it was still called Nogradverőce), but beyond that his first real recollection was of after the October 15 putsch that put the Arrow Cross in power in Hungary. That memory was of October 16, when some “men in a jeep” came to their home on Pasaréti ut in Buda and took his father away.

His mother fled with the children to a friend’s home at Szentkirályi utca 15 in Pest, which she judged to be safer than remaining in Buda. The children often asked, “Where is father?,” and he did return to spend Christmas with them, but not to live with them.

When the bombings began soon after on December 26, they signaled the beginning of the siege of 1944–45 that was one of the longest and bloodiest city sieges of the Second World War... “In terms of human trauma, it comes second only to Stalingrad, comparisons to which were even being made by soldiers fighting at the time. The battle for Budapest raged over the heads of 800,000 non-combatants, no-one was evacuated: 38,000 Hungarian civilians perished.”<sup>3</sup> Professor Schöpflin recalled that it was clear at the time that the civilian population was also being targeted by the siege. He also recalled the building’s housemaster being shot dead by the Germans,<sup>4</sup> the shortage of food, eating horsemeat, and scavenging the chocolate factory that was next door for chocolate on which to survive. The family lived in the cellar at Szentkirályi utca until January 22, which was after the Germans blew up the bridges on the Danube and retreated to Buda. That was when they tentatively ventured out in the streets. By the end of March, the Schöpflin family returned to Buda, only to find the streets littered with the dead. It was so cold that they could walk on the frozen Danube. Looking back on his experience of the siege when he was young, Prof. Schöpflin said that these recollections had not disturbed him – “nem zavart.” Yet when he began returning to Hungary more often, in his 50’s, he came to realize the chilling and permanent effect that the air raid sirens and his

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<sup>2</sup> Krisztian Ungváry, *Battle for Budapest: 100 Days in World War II* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co, 2014), 92; Peter Tulok, Committee for National Remembrance. “Conversation with György Schöpflin.” YouTube video (in Hungarian). Published November 21, 2021. <https://neb.hu/hu/schopflin-gyorggyel-keszult-letut-jelent-meg-a-neb> (accessed June 25, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Ungváry, *Battle for Budapest*, XV.

<sup>4</sup> Housemaster – Building Superintendent.

time in the cellar bomb shelters – indeed, the entire experience of living through the Siege – had had on him.

He made an interesting observation in the interview, namely that the Soviets, in addition to stealing anything that was removable were well aware of what was where and who was who. They had intimate local knowledge provided to them by comrades from 1919, and they used that information not only to loot more successfully in 1945, but also to control the population.

As a child, young György had no understanding of the communist vs. anti-communist movements that influenced his daily life – but life did begin again after the war's end. In the summer of 1945, he spent an idyllic six weeks with an aunt in Szigetszentmarton. Later, upon his return to Pasaréti ut, he spent his time playing with his friends on an empty lot beside their apartment building. Ironically, they played with empty shell casings expended in the street battles during the war. He noted in his interview with Peter Tulok that in his childhood there were Budai sracok in addition to Pesti sracok – making a fond reference to the classic Cold War film about the street kids of Pest.<sup>5</sup>

György Schöpflin's memories of Sweden, where his father's appointment as Hungarian envoy took them in 1948, were not positive. In those days the trip from Budapest to Stockholm took four days by train. His take-away as a ten-year-old was that it was very cold, the Swedes knew nothing of Hungary, and since Sweden had remained neutral during the war, they knew nothing of war. He attempted to learn the language and understand the society but was only in school there for a few months. He did remember the occasion on which his father donned a top hat and went to present his credentials to the king. Amusingly, one of his memories was that the Swedes ate sweet and savory food together, which was something very strange to any Hungarian. He said that more than anything he remained "a good little Magyar" and never learned to like Sweden.

Within a few short months, his father's diplomatic career ran afoul of the politics of the Rákosi government when he was criticized for meeting with Hungarian dissident Vilmos Böhm, who was in exile in Sweden. In Hungary the show trial of former Hungarian Politburo member, László Rajk, was staged in September 1949, and Rajk was subsequently executed for "Titoism," events that convinced Gyula that the family should go into exile in Britain. Although France was also under consideration, they chose London as the Schöpflins had family contacts in England.<sup>6</sup>

György – now George – Schöpflin, now age 10, arrived in London in 1950, after his father resigned from the Hungarian diplomatic service. A rather hardscrabble existence followed for the family, during which his mother, a medical doctor, became the

<sup>5</sup> *Pál utcai fiúk (The Boys of Paul Street)*, 1969. Film, directed by Zoltan Fabri.

<sup>6</sup> Email correspondence with George Schöpflin's widow, Piret Peiker. July 9–19, 2022.

primary breadwinner. George, the oldest of two children, had been born with a physical handicap to one of his hands that he had to overcome, in addition to finding his place in society in the UK. After all, this was the second major upheaval for his family after their short sojourn in Sweden. The family moved from London to Scotland, where it would be quicker for his mother to qualify to practice medicine. She did obtain her license to practice in Scotland and the UK, and later in life was awarded an OBE as a pioneer in family planning.<sup>7</sup> Recalling those peripatetic times, George observed: “menekülés nem könnyű” – migration is not easy.

Nonetheless, their move to Scotland suited George very much, indeed, he loved the country. The family settled in Prestwick close to Glasgow, where he attended the Ayr Academy, the atmosphere of which he much preferred to that of the public school in England that he first attended. He graduated in 1957.<sup>8</sup>

George liked Scottish “egalitarianism, how easily he was accepted, the relative classlessness. His first friends when they arrived were the butchers son and the bakers son who lived on the same street, and nobody cared his mother was a doctor, nor that they were foreigners, nor that he had an injured hand.”<sup>9</sup> Like other young people in Scotland, he worked various jobs during his holidays, the most memorable being as a van driver for a small cheese maker and as an assistant to land inspectors.<sup>10</sup>

He said of their arrival in Glasgow that no matter how well one spoke English, and as immigrants, theirs may not have been perfect, one could never understand the speech of a Glaswegian speaking English. Nevertheless, George was a good student who went on to finish school in Glasgow and then matriculated at the University of Glasgow, receiving an MA in 1960 and then a LLB in 1962. He never practiced law, but he later shared with his wife that “the pattern and dynamics of the legal type of thinking taught to him remained with him and came back to him when he was MEP [Member of the European Parliament].”<sup>11</sup>

After graduation he attended a postgraduate institute of European Studies, the College of Europe in Bruges, Belgium (1962–63), and spent time traveling and hitchhiking across Europe wearing his kilt. (Ostensibly it was easier to get a ride while wearing a kilt!).<sup>12</sup>

The early years of his career as a journalist were spent at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, then the BBC, focusing a great deal on the Soviet sphere of influence as

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<sup>7</sup> Naomi Marks, “Katalin Eva Schopflin, A Pioneer in Family Planning,” *BMJ*. 2003 May 10; 326 (7397): 1040. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1125948/>. (accessed June 26, 2022).

<sup>8</sup> Piret Peiker, July 16, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

well as on East and Central Europe's past and present. When Warsaw Pact troops invaded Czechoslovakia, he was on site as the first journalist from the West. In 1977 he published a book aimed at the western reader bringing to their attention the plight of the Hungarians minorities of Transylvania.<sup>13</sup> He later accepted a teaching position at the London School of Economics, and then, from 1994 on, he held a post as a professor at the London University School of Slavonic and East European Studies. He became an expert in the integration of the nations of Europe into the EU and a respected political analyst. From 1998 until 2004 he held the Jean Monnet Chair at London University, focusing on instruction and research about the European Union, its future and its complexities.<sup>14</sup>

In 1989, with regime changes occurring in all the former Soviet satellites, new political parties with new orientations were formed within Hungary as well. George Schöpflin immediately chose to align himself with FIDESZ and its leadership, its politicians, and its intellectuals. Given his early interest in the Hungarian minorities of the successor states of Central Europe, he attended the first of many subsequent summer sessions of the Bálványosi Nyári Szabadegyetem in Tusnad, Romania – a not for profit founded to bring together the Hungarian minorities of the Carpathian Basin, especially their youth.<sup>15</sup>

When the time came for Hungary to be admitted to the European Union, George Schöpflin's unique background and scholarship made him an ideal candidate to serve as a member of the European Parliament. In the first election after Hungary joined the EU in 2004 he was elected as a FIDESZ MEP representing Hungary. Temporarily leaving academia behind, he was re-elected for three terms, serving as a member of the EU Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs, as a substitute member of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs, and as a member of the Reconciliation of European Histories Group.<sup>16</sup>

As a youth, he remained loyal to his homeland. At the College of Europe he consciously re-taught himself Hungarian, reading Hungarian books. Later in London, he worked with the Hungarian resistance who issued samizdat papers. He recounted to his wife that during those days he had taken a suitcase of cash by train from London to Paris to fund samizdat activities. Throughout his early career, both his journalistic and university work was related to Hungary as well as the rest of the Soviet bloc. However it would be after the regime change of 1989 that he would publicly bring his talents into play on

<sup>13</sup> George Schöpflin, *The Hungarians of Rumania* (London: The Minority Rights Group, 1978).

<sup>14</sup> Emeritus Professor, George Schöpflin (1939–2021) UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies. <https://ucl.ac.uk/ssees/news/2021/nov/emeritus-professor-george-schopflin-1939-2021>.

<sup>15</sup> Zsolt Németh: Foreword in György Schöpflin, *A Contested Europe: Polemics, Papers and Essays* (Reno, NV: Helena History Press, 2022).

<sup>16</sup> György Schöpflin. Wikipedia. [https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Gy%C3%BGrgy\\_Sch%C3%B6flin](https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Gy%C3%BGrgy_Sch%C3%B6flin) (accessed June 25, 2022).

Hungary's behalf. From then until the end of his life, he devoted himself to the cause of Hungary and to that of a united Europe.<sup>17</sup>

In the fifteen years that George Schöpflin served Hungary in EU Parliament, all aspects of his unique portfolio of talents came into play. He brought to the job his intelligence, his gentle nature, and his ironic and sometimes sardonic humor, but also his Anglo–Saxon sense of fair play and gentlemanly behavior – all were exceptional qualities in the Central European theater. As he himself has stated, he never shied from “challenging established perspectives, going against the mainstream on issues like nationhood and liberalism. At the same time ... argument is based on a deep knowledge of Europe as itself and the Europe of the European Union – they are not the same – and, not surprisingly, a thoroughgoing understanding of Central Europe, not just Hungary, obviously, but the other countries and nations of the region.”<sup>18</sup> He wrote these words to describe the essays contained in his final book, but they could be said to characterize all of his work as an MEP.

George Schöpflin's characterization of himself as “a European, of Hungarian issue” says as much about his experience as a youth migrant experiencing and suffering through the chaos of war, the trauma of migration, resettlement in different cultures, learning new languages as it does about his later, more conventional and ambitious career path in academia and as a public intellectual and political figure.<sup>19</sup> All of his life experiences served to provide him with the unique qualifications that served him so well in every aspect of his various careers, but most especially they served the contribution he made as an MEP explaining Hungarian and Central European thinking to the politicians and bureaucrats of the European Union.

That much of Schöpflin's reasonable questioning or many of his arguments were not welcomed is clear by the way the Central European states, especially Hungary and Poland, were treated within the EU. As Schöpflin has written: “Suffice it to say, that the European polis does not welcome inputs from below unless they conform to the liberal integrationism of the elites.”<sup>20</sup>

He goes on:

It will be clear from the argument of this book that the pressures on Poland and Hungary, the two primary targets of a punitive–minded EU, were not started by these states, but by the EU. There were faults on both sides, there invariably are, but the process of punishment then fed back into the EU to underpin its new identity as a site of power with the capacity to discipline

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<sup>17</sup> Piret Peiker, July 19, 2022

<sup>18</sup> György Schöpflin. *A Contested Europe: Polemics, Papers and Essays* (Reno: Helena History Press 2022), 1.

<sup>19</sup> “Europai Vagyok – Magyar Kiadásban”, A quotation attributed to George Schöpflin by Prof. Dr. Ferenc Mészlivetz in his eulogy at the funeral of George Schöpflin, Budapest, March 18, 2022. <http://iask.hu/hu/kosep-europai-odusszia-tiszteletadas-schopflin-gyorgynek>.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

its supposedly erring members. Brexit enhanced this, but note that the moves against Hungary and Poland began well before 2016. In both cases, the conflict showed up the weaknesses in the polis. If membership of the polis is voluntary, and Brexit demonstrates that it is, (thanks to Article 50) then those targeted by the punitive left could reasonably conclude that something was amiss, that they were being required to conform to something to which they had not signed up.<sup>21</sup>

Schöpflin's points are crystal clear as he questions what the polis is, how it is to be characterized, how the EU regards and treats its member states and their desire for national identity:

Obviously, it [the EU] is not a state nor a country nor a republic nor a monarchy nor is it a commonwealth, it is neither a federation nor a confederation, though it may have some of the features of all of them. There is another possibility, namely that the European polis is beginning to resemble a liberal empire and, indeed some approve because that would sideline the demos problem, not least because the demos is too open to the attractions of nationhood. *Those who favour the Empires need some acquiescence in their rule, but the active support of the governed that democracy presupposes is superfluous.* Those who favour the empire argument do so because empires marginalize nations, and, therefore nationalism... all the same it is difficult to see how the polis as empire can be reconciled with any variant of democracy.<sup>22</sup>

George Schöpflin chose not to stand for election again in 2019 and instead devoted his time to scholarship. He led a busy life shuttling between Tallin, Estonia, where he lived with his wife Piret Peiker, and Hungary, where he was an integral member of the Kózseg Institute of Advanced Studies, where he served as a senior research fellow. He published academic works in both English, using the first name George, and in Hungarian, publishing as György.

George Schöpflin's accomplishments deserve to be remembered and his fight to preserve the democratic nature of the EU memorialized, especially by not punishing as second-class citizens the former Soviet satellite nations that came late to membership. For the fifteen years he served as an MEP, he was a watchdog for the values that he held and that were so very clear to him. Would that those values were as clear to the rest of the political and bureaucratic elite.

His writings give us an opportunity to view him through the lens of a successful youth migrant, a denizen of many lands and many cultures who understood the nature of the polis and of democracy as well as the desire for nations and nationalities to retain their identity and values.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 16.

Recalling Schöpflin and his role as an MEP, the American journalist Christopher Caldwell wrote:

There is no one on the European political landscape as hard to categorize as the scholar–statesman György Schöpflin. As a university political scientist in England, he stands out as a particularly Central European kind of polyglot Renaissance man. As a member of the European Parliament for Hungary’s dynamic Fidesz party, he has brought to some of the bitterest recent EU battles an Anglo–Saxon commonsense and fair play. And for decades he has been writing enduring literary–political–historical essays that make complicated things clear and crooked stories straight.<sup>23</sup>

Caldwell’s words are a fitting tribute to the memory of George Schöpflin and the contribution he made not just to Hungary, whom he represented so capably in European Parliament, but also his contribution to scholarship and education in his two adopted homelands, the United Kingdom and Estonia. He was respected by all who had the privilege to get know him. He will be sorely missed.

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<sup>23</sup> Endorsements for George Schöpflin’s *A Contested Europe*, received by Helena History Press, October 28, 2019.