George FALUDY

(b. 1910)

Charged as an American spy in his native Hungary, Faludy spent three years (1950-1953) in a labour camp. He became a Canadian citizen in 1976. A distinguished poet, he has written, among other things, an account of his imprisonment, My Happy Days in Hell *(1962).*

Convocation Address

Upon being awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Toronto, 29 November 1978.

For an exile who has spent the better part of his life taking refuge from the sadistic east in the masochistic west, it is an almost overwhelming honour to be recognized in this fashion.

I have made my home in Canada for the past 11 years, and have found here, as nowhere else, the peace and security of a marvelously decent society. But of the many kindnesses shown me here, none has moved me more than this honorary degree from the University of Toronto. My happiness is the greater in that the tradition of humanistic learning is in this University far more alive than in many other quarters. I must admit as well some trepidation in following in the footsteps of a former compatriot, the late Zoltan Kodaly[1], who was also honoured here some years ago.

If there was time, I would consider it my duty to speak on a subject which has long occupied my mind as much as poetry itself: on the survival of humanistic learning in a world where affluence has joined hands with destruction; a world in which absolutist ethics has given way to relativistic, then to utilitarian and finally to no ethics at all; a world in which education increasingly means vocational training, the diffusion of facts and data; in which comfort has become the measure of civilization; in which our greatest intellectual achievement, our science, has abjured the concept of wisdom, just as philosophy has come to renounce love; a world, in short, with one foot firmly on the foundation of an incredible advance in knowledge and technique, and the other foot dangling in a spiritual vacuum. But my purpose this evening is not to depress you with the fate of humanistic learning, but to tell you briefly how that learning on one occasion ensured the physical and spiritual survival of several hundred people, including myself.

Some years ago in Hungary I found myself, for the second time in my life, in a concentration camp. There were some thirteen hundred inmates: democrats, Catholics, liberals, socialists and people without any political preferences, most sentenced to hard labour on trumped-up charges, though a few were there without

[1] Zoltan Kodaly (1882–1967), Hungarian composer.

having been sentenced or even charged. We could neither write nor receive letters and parcels; we had no books, newspapers, radios, or visitors. We cut stones from dawn to dusk 365 days a year, except for May Day. We did this on a diet of 1,200 calories a day. Our situation was thus better than in a Nazi concentration camp, but much worse than in the present-day Soviet camps recently described by Bukovsky and others.

At first we returned to the barracks at night deadly tired, with no strength even to pull off our army boots, and fall asleep on the rotten straw sacks. Our lives seemed not to differ from those of the slaves that built the pyramids, and our futures seemed equally bleak. But already on the day of my arrest, in the Black Maria that took me away, I had met young friends who had been denied a university education because of the war. Their faces had lit up: "You can lecture us in the camp," they said, "and we'll get our university education that way."

After about a week in the camp two of them approached me and insisted that I start my lectures immediately after lights out. We were by then even more exhausted than on the day of our arrival. At first four men sat beside my pallet, and we were jeered at by the others. Eventually twelve prisoners gathered beside my straw sack every night for an hour or two. We recited poems—Hungarian poems and foreign poems in translation. Among the English ones the "Ode to the West Wind"[2] became the favourite. Then I would speak on literature, history or philosophy and my lecture would be discussed by all.

I was by no means the only prisoner to deliver such lectures. A former member of the short-lived democratic government knew *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by heart, and recited both to an enthusiastic audience. There were lectures on Roman law, on the history of the Crusades, narrations of large parts of *War and Peace*, courses in mathematics and astronomy avidly listened to, sometimes by men who had never entered a secondary school. There was even a former staff colonel who whistled entire operas. Those of us who lectured ransacked our memories to keep alive a civilization from which we were hopelessly—and, it seemed, permanently—cut off.

There were prisoners who looked on all this with disgust, maintaining that we were insane to spend our sleeping time in lectures when we were all going to die anyway. These men, intent on survival, retreated into themselves, becoming lonely, merciless with others, shutting out thought and even speech.

By the second winter of our imprisonment it began to happen when we were working that once, twice or even three times in the course of a day a prisoner would suddenly stop work and stagger off through the deep snow. After twenty or thirty yards of running he would collapse. In each case the man would die a day or two later, usually without regaining consciousness. Those who died in this way were always the men who had been most determined to survive, those who had concentrated on nothing but food, sleep and warmth. For my part,

[2] See Shelley, p. 155.

owing perhaps to large doses of pragmatism and positivism in my youth I was reluctant to admit the obvious: that delighting in a good poem or discussing Plato's Socratic dialogues could somehow arm the spirit to the point that it could prevent the body's collapse.

By then I was presented with proof. While I was washing myself in the snow before the barracks one evening, one of my pupils, a former government official, a strong young man, came up to tell me that he would not attend the lecture that night, nor indeed any other night. He wanted to survive and was going to sleep rather than talk; he was going, he said, to live the life of a tree or a vegetable. He waited before me as if expecting my objection. I was indescribably tired, and closing my eyes I saw scenes from my childhood, the sort of hallucinations one has in a state of semi-starvation. Suddenly it occurred to me that I must dissuade the man. But he was already gone. He slept perhaps twenty yards from me, but I never summoned the strength to argue with him. Five days later we saw him stop work, begin to run towards the trees, and then collapse in the snow. His death has been on my conscience ever since. But without exception all those who lectured, and all those who listened, survived.

It does not seem to me to be so far-fetched to apply this lesson in the infinitely more pleasant society of this country. It justifies, I think, the Platonic view that man as given by nature owes it to himself to obey the dictates of his higher nature to rise above evil and mindlessness. Those in the camp who attempted this survived, although physical survival had not been their aim. And those who for the sake of physical survival vegetated, perished in large numbers. It seems to me that the mentality of these latter is, *mutatis mutandis*,[3] analogous to the mentality of the consumer societies of the world, of those who seem obsessed with producing and consuming an ever-growing mountain of things to ensure comfort and survival; who have addicted themselves to energy as if to morphine until they are ready to destroy all nature to increase the dosage; who have, indeed, increased our life-span but have failed to mention that the brain requires jogging even more than the heart if that life-span is to mean anything.

The other conclusion I have drawn from my camp experience, and have tried to embody in my own poetry, is that our whole fragile tradition of art and thought is neither an amusement nor a yoke. For those who steep themselves in it, it provides both a guide and a goal far surpassing all the half-baked ideologies that have blown up at our feet in this century like landmines. Sitting comfortably in the present and looking forward to longevity in an unknown future does nothing to ensure our survival nor even to make it desirable. In any case we do not live in the future; we live in the present, and all we have to guide us in this present is the accumulated thought and experience of those who have lived before us.

For all the deficiency of my own learning, then, this is what I have attempted to voice in my work, and at this point in my life I feel safe in echoing the words of Petronius: "*Pervixi: neque enim fortuna malignior umquam eripiet nobis quod*

[3] Things change as they must.

prior hora dedit—I have lived, and no evil fate can ever take away from us what the past has given." I believe we will do ourselves a favour if we extend the meaning of the author of the Satyricon to include the past of all humanity.

I wish to give my thanks for the exceptional honour bestowed upon me this evening by a great University, and to all of you for your patience. Thank you.