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LEHEL VADON: *UPTON SINCLAIR IN HUNGARY*

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Can it be said that writers are immortal? Upton Sinclair thought so. But has the muckraking novelist and crusading socialist actually attained such status himself? Lehel Vadon has helped to answer that question affirmatively—at least according to one of Sinclair’s standards. It was long the contention of the author of *The Jungle* and countless other books that one of the surest signs of an author’s immortality was his popularity outside his native land. And Professor Vadon has amply demonstrated that Sinclair has long had a more than ample audience in a country far removed from the grimy Baltimore and gritty New York of his youth and young manhood—and even farther removed from his adopted and much beloved southern California.

Just as *The Jungle* established a twenty-eight year old Upton Sinclair as a major writer in the United States, so the introduction of the novel to European audiences was the initial reason that Sinclair had a significant following in pre-World War I Hungary. More specifically, Sinclair’s fictional expose of exploitation in the American meatpacking industry both made him a hero of sorts among Hungarian social democrats and led the Hungarian government to “tighten up on” its own meat industry.

But at the same time Sinclair was not highly regarded in Hungarian literary and intellectual circles. In Vadon’s words, the “writer’s painstakingly accurate documentary style” virtually assured

that Hungarian literary journals would have “little appreciation” for Upton Sinclair.

Such journals in both Hungary and the United States were correct to dismiss much of Sinclair’s early work as second-rate at best and utter trash at worst. But *The Jungle* was another matter entirely. Here was a gripping story that also happened to be a piece of propaganda (as opposed to too much of Sinclair’s work which was propaganda first, last, and always). Therefore, it is not surprising that within a year of its appearance in American bookstores this novel was translated into Hungarian and published in Hungary.

Still, the motivations of the original Hungarian translator, Károlyné Baross, were neither overtly literary nor directly concerned with industrial exploitation. Instead, she hoped that the availability of *The Jungle* in Hungary would make Hungarians think at least twice before deciding to immigrate to a country which featured diseased food and poisonous working conditions.

But Professor Vadon is quick to point out that *The Jungle* was read and appreciated by “literate working class readers,” who regarded Sinclair as “their own writer,” and who did not hesitate to declare him the “socialist writer” that he remained.

And no doubt Sinclair would have been pleased, proud as he was of his dual commitment to a craft (writing) and a cause (socialism). Which was primary for Upton Sinclair? That is impossible to say, because his two careers were so thoroughly intertwined. What can be said is that the young Sinclair was first a writer. And far from being a writer of socialist novels or socialist tracts he was a writer of jokes and pulp fiction. In sum, he wrote for that most capitalistic of reasons: to earn a living.

Money was not a plentiful commodity in a household composed of an impoverished mother and her precocious son, Sinclair’s alcoholic father having abandoned his small family for a life of drinking and dissipation. Young Upton did have a possible escape: He could have become a permanent foster son to his mother’s wealthy sister. But loyalty to his mother led him to reject any such overture. Instead, he

set to work as a writer with a singlemindedness that was only matched by his subsequent devotion to socialism.

Sinclair did permit himself a few diversions along the way to immortality. In his early twenties he discovered that gambling was his “vice.” Throughout his life tennis provided him an occasional respite from work. And between twenty-two and his octogenarian years he did manage to acquire three wives, a son, and a comfortable income.

Nonetheless, Upton Sinclair was never the stereotypical poor boy who wanted to become rich. In the first place, time spent with his affluent cousins taught him that life for the rich was not necessarily trouble free. Secondly, he discovered socialism sometime in his mid-twenties. Improbable as it seems, Sinclair claimed that he had had no awareness of socialism—and only a vague understanding of populism—until the early years of the administration of Theodore Roosevelt.

Roosevelt, who adamantly opposed socialism, had little reason to fear Sinclair’s brand of it. Never did Upton Sinclair so much as flirt with the idea that socialism was to be achieved at the point of a gun. In fact, he never wavered from his belief that the ballot box was the only way to bring socialism to any country. Finally, his socialist utopia was essentially a middle class utopia where intelligent people, gifted people, rational people set the tone for a society of order, virtue, and equality. As a socialist, Sinclair’s central tenet was that economic inequality was at the root of every evil that beset society. His guiding assumption was that the elimination of that brand of inequality would automatically usher in a society without conflict.

But in the meantime there was plenty of conflict in Sinclair’s private life, not to mention plenty of social conflict available for him to excoriate in book after book. A professionally driven Upton Sinclair generally tried to avoid personal conflict by essentially ignoring his first wife and only son. He was also so inadequate at playing the role of provider that his father-in-law removed his daughter and grandson from the writer’s home. When the family was reunited it was in a leaky cabin near Princeton, New Jersey, a cabin from which the nominal head of the household escaped to write hour after solitary hour in a nearby tent

which just happened to be dry. The result of those efforts was a Civil War novel which he called *Manassas*. This book was not a financial success, but it did lead directly to the writing and serializing of *The Jungle* through the popular socialist periodical, "The Appeal of Reason."

Despite tireless efforts and a genius for self-promotion (Like the American impresario, P. T. Barnum, Upton Sinclair held to the axiom that any publicity was good publicity.), Sinclair did not produce a novel to match *The Jungle* for a number of years, if ever. *Jimmie Higgins*, published in 1919, perhaps came close. Vadon calls it one of the "best known and most important works of anti-war socialist literature." Written in part to atone for his curious support for the American decision to enter World War I, Sinclair's novel also endorsed the Bolshevik Revolution. It was, Vadon, concludes, the work in which Sinclair "came closest to the philosophy of marxism." In all, the novel received two Hungarian translations and was made into a film in the Soviet Union.

But Sinclair remained a missionary socialist, not a doctrinaire marxist. That point of view was clearly expressed in many of his post-1920 books. And because of that point of view his continued popularity in Hungary was due in no small measure to the efforts of socialist magazines and newspapers.

According to Lehel Vadon, between 1920 and 1945 Upton Sinclair was "one of the most widely read socialist writers in Hungary." But he was also a writer whose works were the subject of great debate within Hungary. To some Hungarian critics, his "individualistic socialist philosophy" was inadequately proletarian. To more "bourgeois critics" he was a writer with a pedestrian prose style and an inability to create compelling fictional characters.

Despite these deficiencies, Sinclair did not lack for Hungarian readers and commentaries. Professor Vadon details a series of Sinclair productions that resonated with Hungarians. In fact, it was the contention of more than one Hungarian critic that through the early 1930s there were troubling similarities between the "historic situations" in Hungary and America. Reactionary regimes were in power in both

countries. More than that, fascism was on the rise in the form of the Horthy police and the California police force. Hungarian and American workers were both learning “first hand” about the consequences of reactionary “terror.”

Despite his outspoken opposition to fascism Upton Sinclair consistently refused to align himself with communists. Unlike many American liberals who became enchanted with Soviet communism, Sinclair remained a democratic socialist who was suspicious of communism. He could be accused of faddism in that he could be seduced by any number of “quack cures” for what ailed society in general and its members in particular. Vegetarianism, prohibitionism, spiritualism, and sex hygiene campaigns did at various times have a devotee in Upton Sinclair. But never was the fad—or the reality—of communism attractive to him.

At the same time it must be said that Sinclair was quite capable of shutting the horrors of Soviet communism out of his mind. And if, for example, the facts of Stalin’s purges did penetrate his defenses, he refused to criticize Soviet Russia publicly. Having made a long private practice of ignoring family responsibilities and emotional commitments, he made a lengthy public career of ignoring the consequences of idealism and power run amok in Lenin’s and Stalin’s Russia.

Why? Perhaps his first wife put it best: “He (Sinclair) is a Conservative by instinct and a radical by choice.” His second wife, Mary Craig Kimbrough sized her husband up a bit differently: “Upton Sinclair knows nothing about human nature, except that he is determined to change it.” What may be even more relevant to the question at hand is that Sinclair was, according to biographer Leon Harris, an “American romantic.” As such, he was emotionally incapable of embracing or condemning communism.

But Upton Sinclair was never hesitant to condemn American Capitalism, whether it had run amok or not. And Hungarians, notes Vadon, were anxious to read those condemnations. His barely fictionalized attack on John D. Rockefeller and lesser American petroleum barons, *Oil!*, was translated into Hungarian within a year of

its American debut; and it eventually “enjoyed eight publications” in Hungary.

A year later Sinclair published *Boston*, which Hungarian and American critics alike have long considered to be one of his best works. The centerpiece of the story is what Vadon labels the “judicial murder” of two Italian immigrant anarchists Nicolai Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti. In retrospect, Sinclair was not so sure that such a label was entirely accurate. According to Harris, he “gradually” became convinced that Sacco and Vanzetti “had at least known about the hold up” (which led to the murder of the payroll guards for which the two men stood trial). In the final analysis Sinclair tended to agree with local Boston radicals who thought that “Sacco was guilty and Vanzetti knew it.” But whatever his speculations about their guilt or innocence, Sinclair was certain that they had not received a fair trial.

Sinclair did entertain more than idle hope that *Boston* would bring him at least a Pulitzer, if not a Nobel prize. His casual friend and occasional correspondent, H. L. Mencken, thought that Sinclair had no business accepting the latter: “A man who hates capitalism as ardently as Upton Sinclair could not conceivably accept money from a dynamite manufacturer.”

There was no need to worry. Sinclair would never win either prize. By 1934 another prize loomed before him: the governorship of California. Now fifty-six, Sinclair was not exactly a political novice. As a socialist he had run and lost a New Jersey congressional race years earlier. In 1931 Norman Thomas approached him to run for president on the socialist ticket. Three years later Sinclair would resign from the Socialist Party to run for governor as a Democrat and on his EPIC (End Poverty in California) pledge.

Tired of the socialist schisms, sick of losing and being ignored, Sinclair decided that part of the problem was the word “socialist” itself. Hence his decision to register as a Democrat and pitch his appeal in the direction of the “ruined middle class.” Fellow Democrats Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt did not immediately spurn their new ally, but they pointedly refused to endorse his candidacy. So did most of

Hollywood, Charlie Chaplin and a very few others excepted. In fact, movie magnate Louis B. Mayer led the forces against Sinclair. Studios threatened to move to Florida if Sinclair won. Fake newsreels were deployed against him. In sum, a then astonishing \$10,000,000 was spent to defeat him. In this instance, money did a good deal of talking. Sinclair lost by approximately 350,000 votes out of 2.5 million cast. Never again would he run for elective office.

If the career of Upton Sinclair, the politician, was over, the career of Sinclair, the writer, was not. Professor Vadon chronicles the publications and Hungarian of many more Upton Sinclair books, including his autobiography, which received two Hungarian translations and which H. L. Mencken thought was Sinclair's best work.

But Upton Sinclair's popularity in Hungary was not necessarily without interruption. After 1949 serious, sustained criticism of his works could be found in Hungarian periodicals and scholarly journals. Suddenly, Vadon writes, Sinclair was being dismissed as a "vacillating pseudo-writer, a gutless unprincipled careerist with the political views of a fascist." Such harsh attacks were followed by something arguably worse: silence. Between the late 1940s and the late 1950s virtually nothing was written about Upton Sinclair in Hungary. Why?

It is Vadon's contention that the Cold War was doing its best to freeze out all non-communist, non-marxist writers, the socialist Upton Sinclair included. In effect, he was put on the "blacklist," thereby denying the Hungarian reading public access to his works. Not until the 1960s and Hungarian thaw of the larger Cold War was he "restored to grace."

Among the first Upton Sinclair books to find their way back into the hands of Hungarian readers were the eleven volumes (and 7,364 pages) of the *Lanny Budd* series. As an overall literary work this series was, in Vadon's choice words, "worse than the best of Sinclair's art," but nonetheless readers in Hungary and elsewhere "greedily devoured" each new volume.

Nazi sympathizers and Soviet sympathizers alternately took Sinclair to task for his alleged anti-Nazi and anti-Soviet leanings. As we

have seen, Sinclair leaned most decisively in the anti-Nazi direction. That he was subjected to attacks from the right should not be surprising. But Professor Vadon is interested in examining the critics to Sinclair's left. It is noteworthy that democratic socialist Upton Sinclair first received acclaim in Hungary because of his commitment to that version of socialism. A half century later Upton Sinclair was still firmly in the democratic socialist camp. But for a time during the height of the Cold War that very commitment to democratic socialism was more than enough to call his immortality into question—at least in what once constituted the “Soviet bloc” countries. Lehel Vadon has painstakingly charted Upton Sinclair's flirtations with immortality—and official death—and rebirth—in Hungary. Let us be thankful for this historian's efforts. And let us all hope that Sinclair's future rests on his literary merits—or demerits—and not on the machinations of political regimes, east or west.