

The Phantom Voice and the Text's Body

Final Report

For the Visegrad Scholarship at the Open Society Archives

Gábor Danyi

My area of study focuses on the cultural and social practices of samizdat: the characteristic phenomenon of the Cold War period which incorporated the entire system of uncensored textual production and distribution. My aim is to cast light on the history of Hungarian samizdat from a comparative perspective which is able to show how the Hungarian samizdat culture differed from other socialist countries' unofficial textual production. On the other hand mapping the various models of dissemination, the strategies of samizdat culture and the identities of publishers and distributors, we can observe patterns of cultural resistance, as well as an alternative textual universe from the *practical turn* viewpoint.

Between March 16st and May 18 I worked as a Visegrad scholarship recipient in the Open Society Archives. During these two months – as a part of my wider research – I focused on the relationship between Hungarian samizdat culture and Radio Free Europe. Even though it is well-known RFE served as an echo-chamber for samizdat and tamizdat publications and it significantly widened the scope of samizdat texts, we know relatively little about the radio's listeners attitude to samizdat culture. On the other hand the radio programs constituted a surface/output for the listeners behind which transnational information channels enabled the circulation of the materials. Finally, the link between the RFE and the democratic opposition in Hungary as a part of a diversified transnational network was the result of the radio's changed policy toward the Hungarian People's Democracy, as well as of the reconsideration of the radio's role by the Hungarian dissidents.

In order to analyse these questions I generally based my researches on three archival sources:

1. On the transcriptions of the telephone calls, 1985-1989 (HU OSA 400-40-14)
2. On the transcriptions of radio programs which are located in the National Széchényi Library
3. On the interviews made by the Black Box Foundation (HU OSA 305-0-4)

The transcriptions of the telephone calls

The first archival source includes the transcription of messages recorded in the radio's answering machine which was set up in 1985 in order to modernize the communication channel between RFE and its audience and to replace correspondence. The answering machine recorded the listeners' calls and messages in two minutes, while the most important and relevant messages and questions were answered every week during the ten minute long

program entitled Forum of Listeners (Hallgatók Fóruma).¹ Hungarian listeners usually called the answering machine service in order to comment on the programs, to request broadcasts to be repeated, to give feedback about the broadcast's usually bad quality, to share jokes about the current political situation, or to request information about various topics (e.g. what is the phone number of Amnesty International, what are the possibilities of emigration, or when will socialism come to an end at last, etc.). However the transcriptions of the telephone calls constitute very heterogeneous materials; we can observe the pale patterns of the Hungarian samizdat culture.

I would like to start with a case which is very characteristic on the one hand and very unique on the other hand. In 1985 a listener called the RFE in order to get information about the poems of the émigré writer, György Faludy, that they heard previously on the radio. What was unusual was that the listener mentioned their memories from the 1950's, when they had been collecting Faludy's poems, typing them and giving them to others as gifts. The listener also mentioned that their house (serving as a 'private archive' in this case) burnt down in 1956, and as a consequence these collected materials perished. Thirty years later the listener expressed their happiness to hear some poems by the same author and also expressed interest in gaining access to the entire book of these poems.²

The listener's request and story cast light on three important factors of the non-conformist, unofficial culture in Hungary. Apart from being an important example of early samizdat production in Hungary the story sheds light on the fragility of these texts, showing that they cannot be characterized by long-term preservation. On the other hand the story also draws attention to the importance of RFE in transmitting and broadcasting texts which were out of reach during the decades of communism. It underlines the radio's role of being an important bridgehead in the transnational circulation of non-conformist materials, eliminating the Iron Curtain isolation of the East from the West. And finally the story represents the listeners' aim to reconstruct the body of these broadcast texts, to build private archives by gaining access to them physically.

The 'phantom voice' and the text's body

In order to contextualize the radio's ability to transmit and make present certain registers of cultural production and heritage suppressed in the Hungarian People's Democracy, I turned to an important aspect of media theory. In Ken McMullen's film titled *Ghost Dance* from 1983, Jacques Derrida, the French philosopher considered telecommunication and cinematography as realms of phantoms, for they enable the phantoms to come back and haunt us. In his book called *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* Friedrich A. Kittler, the German media theorist declared that after 'the technological differentiation of optics, acoustics and writing exploded

¹ See Gyula BORBÁNDI, *Magyarok az Angol Kertben. A Szabad Európa Rádió története*, Európa, Budapest, 1996, 488-492.

² *Telefonhívások 12.* (Hungarian Service Október 7, 1985), 2.; HU OSA 300-40-14 Box 1 [Telephone calls Aug – Oct 1985]; Records of RFE/RL Research Institut (Fonds 300), Hungarian Unit (Subfonds 40), Telephone Calls (Series 12)

Gutenberg's writing monopoly', 'memories and dreams, the dead and ghosts, became technically reproducible' by means of electronic technologies having the ability of recording, storing and playing back.

The characteristics of the electronic media "always already providing the appearances of specters",³ possesses huge significance in the Cold War period. In the institution of RFE – after the operation of the archival machinery of gathering information, evaluating and editing it – the news, reports, commentaries etc. became transformed into radio programs and broadcast into the Soviet bloc. In this way samizdat and tamizdat texts coming from the bloc, also could be transformed into acoustic form and rebroadcast into the communist countries. Listeners in the Soviet bloc tuned in and listened to the broadcasts, however they did not have access to the original body of materials, as these often existed outside the country, and thus their main connection to them was the acoustic form of the 'phantom voice'. A listener for example, who declared to have heard about the existence of *Darkness at Noon* only by the radio, sought help in finding a place to buy the book in the West.⁴ Another (or maybe the same?) listener requested a fragment of the same work to be repeated in order to record or transcribe it.⁵ The asymmetry between the non-accessible vehicle of these cultural products and the 'phantom voice' transmitting or reporting on them resulted in the aim of reconstructing the 'body' of these materials.

What were the practices of this reconstruction work? Reading further the transcriptions of the telephone calls we can establish three basic categories:

1. recording the programs on tape or transcribing them
2. getting access to Western bookstores
3. getting access to samizdat materials within the country

(All of these categories relate to people not only living in the Eastern bloc, but also in the West.)

Reconstructing the body

From time to time listeners requested the repetition of certain programs in order to record them on tape or to transcribe them. It happened in the case of the poems of György Faludy, or the work of Arthur Koestler. However, according to the telephone calls the most popular

³ Friedrich A. KITTLER, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, transl. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young – Michael Wutz, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 10, 12, 16.

⁴ *Telefonhívások* 68. (Hungarian Service 5 November, 1986), 7-8.; HU OSA 300-40-14 Box 1 [Telephone calls Nov – Dec 1986]; Records of RFE/RL Research Institut (Fonds 300), Hungarian Unit (Subfonds 40), Telephone Calls (Series 12)

⁵ *Telefonhívások* 52. (Hungarian Service 16 July, 1986), 11.; HU OSA 300-40-14 Box 1 [Telephone calls Jul – Oct 1986]; Records of RFE/RL Research Institut (Fonds 300), Hungarian Unit (Subfonds 40), Telephone Calls (Series 12)

programs in the second half of the 1980's undoubtedly were those connected to the commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the revolution.

As Gyula Borbándi wrote between 1 of July and 31 of December in 1986, 439 programs were broadcast about the history, the background and the consequences of the Hungarian revolution.⁶ In these months the radio played an extremely important role in restoring the suppressed tradition of the revolution by making it present again, by vivifying and re-animating its events. The guarantee of this re-animation process was the archival machinery of the RFE which recorded on magnetic tape the broadcasts of the Hungarian radio stations all through the days of the revolution in 1956. Thus thirty years later RFE could serve as an archive possessing original audio documents about the revolution and sharing them with the Hungarian audience. The commemorating programs in 1986 including, among others, these historical audio documents,⁷ had a huge impact in Hungary and a large number of the listeners called the radio in order to thank them for these programs. One listener, for example, who at that time participated in the events of the revolution as a university student, summarized the role of the programs like this:

Now, when I am listening to your reminiscences, I am reliving those minutes again and [I testify] the credibility of the witness, declaring with absolute faith that everything happened in the way you related them. God bless you for the true words and for keeping awake the memory.⁸

The idiosyncratic voices of Imre Nagy, János Kádár and other key figures of the revolution strengthened the credibility of the radio in the eyes of the younger generation as well. Another listener who at the time of the revolution was one and a half years old, considered the original audio documents as conclusive evidence, and he confessed that despite not being a sentimental man, listening to the Rákóczi radio station's re-broadcasted call for help from the time of the Soviet intervention, his eyes filled with tears.⁹ Listeners from East and West called RFE and requested information concerning whether these audio documents about the revolution are available on magnetic tape, because they wanted to have access to those materials. A listener calling under a pseudonym in the name of a smaller group requested the programs entitled the *Chronicle of the Revolution* (A forradalom krónikája) and *At the Doorstep of Freedom* (A szabadság kapujában) to be repeated since his recording did not succeed because of the broadcast's bad quality. He also requested information on where to buy those materials on magnetic tape in case it was not possible to fulfill his first request.¹⁰

⁶ Gyula BORBÁNDI, *Magyarok az Angol Kertben. A Szabad Európa Rádió története*, Európa, Budapest, 1996, 477.

⁷ Cf. *A szabadság kapujában. A Szabad Európa Rádió emlékműsora a magyar forradalom és szabadságharc harmincadik évfordulóján. Részletek*, München, 1988.

⁸ *Telefonhívások 68.* (Hungarian Service 5 November, 1986), 13.; HU OSA 300-40-14 Box 1 [Telephone calls Nov – Dec 1986]; Records of RFE/RL Research Institut (Fonds 300), Hungarian Unit (Subfonds 40), Telephone Calls (Series 12)

⁹ *Telefonhívások 72.* (Hungarian Service 3 December, 1986), 7.; HU OSA 300-40-14 Box 1 [Telephone calls Nov – Dec 1986]; Records of RFE/RL Research Institut (Fonds 300), Hungarian Unit (Subfonds 40), Telephone Calls (Series 12)

¹⁰ *Telefonhívások 68.* (Hungarian Service 5 November, 1986), 9-10.; HU OSA 300-40-14 Box 1 [Telephone calls Nov – Dec 1986]; Records of RFE/RL Research Institut (Fonds 300), Hungarian Unit (Subfonds 40), Telephone Calls (Series 12)

The archival source of the telephone calls also provided evidence about one unique case when a listener transcribed the ‘phantom voice’ of the commemorating programs, reconstructing its hard copy in the form of a 500-paged typewritten book.¹¹ As the listener called RFE under a pseudonym he was probably from the East side of the Iron Curtain, and his end product can be considered a ‘radizdat’.

The second main form of the reconstruction work was getting access to Western bookstores. Listeners often requested the addresses of bookstores in Vienna, Munich or Paris and they also asked where to buy émigré journals (*Bécsi Napló*, *Irodalmi Újság*). In 1988 a listener declared that it is easier to buy Zděnek Mlynář’s book entitled *Prague* in the West and smuggle it into the country rather than going to samizdat bookstores which were supposed to be under police observation.¹²

This opinion takes us to the third way of the reconstruction work: from time to time listeners asked how it is possible to get access to samizdat materials: to the publications of AB or ABC Publishing Houses or to the copies of *Beszélő* journal. A listener calling from Stuttgart declared being unable to get access to the 21th issue of *Beszélő*, because his acquaintances living in Hungary are afraid to visit samizdat boutiques.¹³ Another listener calling from Hungary refused to go to samizdat boutiques – instead he persistently requested a review of the samizdat publication made for the 60th anniversary of the émigré sociologist, István Kemény.¹⁴ The listeners’ messages also cast light on the Budapest-centric feature of the Hungarian samizdat culture and on the narrow audience it could reach. Thus on the basis of the telephone calls we can conclude that RFE not only widened the audience of the samizdat materials, but it also meant safer access to them.

Transnational networks

While the radio served as an important source for the listeners in accessing materials, behind the radio’s output very complicated transnational networks and information channels enabled the circulation and the exchange of the materials. Mapping these transnational networks, I focused on a very characteristic case. In 1979 in Budapest Karl Pfeifer, an Austrian journalist recorded on magnetic tape an interview with three sociologists: András Hegedüs, Tamás

¹¹ *Telefonhívások 118*. (Hungarian Service 28 October, 1987), 4.; HU OSA 300-40-14 Box 2 [Telephone calls Sep – Dec 1987]; Records of RFE/RL Research Institut (Fonds 300), Hungarian Unit (Subfonds 40), Telephone Calls (Series 12)

¹² *Telefonhívások 163*. (Hungarian Service 7 September, 1988), 2.; HU OSA 300-40-14 Box 2 [Telephone calls Sep – Dec 1988]; Records of RFE/RL Research Institut (Fonds 300), Hungarian Unit (Subfonds 40), Telephone Calls (Series 12)

¹³ *Telefonhívások 130*. (Hungarian Service 20 January, 1988), 5.; HU OSA 300-40-14 Box 2 [Telephone calls Jan – May 1988]; Records of RFE/RL Research Institut (Fonds 300), Hungarian Unit (Subfonds 40), Telephone Calls (Series 12)

¹⁴ *Telefonhívások 114*. (Hungarian Service 30 September, 1987), 5.; HU OSA 300-40-14 Box 2 [Telephone calls Sep – Dec 1987]; Records of RFE/RL Research Institut (Fonds 300), Hungarian Unit (Subfonds 40), Telephone Calls (Series 12)

Földvári and Zoltán Zsille, who all voiced their opinion concerning the hard Hungarian economic situation and the perspectives of the dissident movement in East-Central Europe.¹⁵

The interview that reached Vienna returned to the Hungarian audience in two different channels. On the one hand Pfeifer published the interview in the *Neues Forum*, a biweekly journal in German, then RFE in Munich translated it back into the Hungarian language and broadcast it in Hungary. On the other hand the interview became published in the 6th issue of the Hungarian émigré journal *Magyar Füzetek* in Paris in 1980, while a year later it was possible to buy its transcription in the samizdat boutique of László Rajk – as the program of RFE entitled *The Wave Lengths of Tomorrow* brought it to the audience's attention.¹⁶ The transmission through two different information channels resulted in two different versions of the same text. In the first case the interview was changing its vehicle (from the magnetic tape to a printed journal and finally to a radio broadcast) and its language (from Hungarian to German to Hungarian again). In the second case the interview only changed its vehicle (from magnetic tape to printed journal to samizdat form), but not the language. No matter, a listener who heard the interview's first version broadcast by the RFE in Hungary wrote in his letter addressed to the presenter of *The Wave Lengths of Tomorrow*, Levente Kasza:

...it is so nice to hear uncensored opinions, which cannot be published by us. The conversation travelled to Vienna, Munich and involved a foreign language before it returned there where it first became articulated: to Budapest. It is a pity that everything must be so complicated.¹⁷

This characteristic case sheds light on how the émigré publishing houses and journals, the Western institutions and the samizdat producers worked in a parallel way and became intertwined with each other. As a consequence a huge amount of the samizdat materials possessed transnational character. While reprinting the texts coming from the West was a conventional practice, we also find examples of the reconstruction work in the samizdat culture. György Krassó's independent publishing house with the name *Hungarian October* published a tiny booklet, which was actually the transcript of a radio interview about economic reform that was made with the émigré sociologist, István Kemény and complemented with a reprinted article from the official daily newspaper *Népszabadság*, which it referred to.

Dissident strategies and RFE

The relationship between RFE and samizdat culture also can be analysed from the perspective of dissident strategies. The interviews made by Black Box Foundation help to contextualize and historicize it. The very reserved relationship between the editors of RFE and the Hungarian non-conformist actors were significantly changing starting with the second half of the 1970's. József Szabados, director of the Hungarian Section, urged a pluralistic programme

¹⁵ Cf.

http://w3.osaarchivum.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2110&Itemid=2262&lang=hu

¹⁶ *The Wave Lengths of Tomorrow*, 28 June, 1981, OSZK, FM3/11921, 77.

¹⁷ *The Wave Lengths of Tomorrow*, 16 March, 1980, OSZK, FM3/11921, 76.

policy and closer contact with the Hungarian audience and the events happening in the country. In the context of this policy Levente Kasza built up a direct contact with the Hungarian democratic opposition.¹⁸ Meanwhile the members of the democratic opposition – recognizing the possibilities in it – reconsidered their relation to the RFE.¹⁹

This relationship developing from the 1980's (thanks to telephone connections and other information channels) helped to crystallize the most important dissident strategies. It is well-known that Hungarian democratic opposition tried to use RFE as a medium, as a press platform which – as I have already mentioned – could widen the scope of samizdat materials and dissident views. Even though every samizdat copy was checked by 3-4 readers²⁰ and the size of the audience that samizdat culture reached can be estimated at about ten thousand readers, Hungarian samizdat claimed only a narrow audience with roughly 70-80% of them in Budapest.²¹ The programs of Levente Kasza entitled *Without Commentary* (Kommentár Nélkül), *The Wave Length of Tomorrow* (A holnap hullámhosszán) broadcasted reviews, summaries about samizdat journals and other publications. On the other hand dissident actors were also informing RFE about human right abuses and through the scheme of building publicity they could protect themselves from serious state repression. Róza Hodosán's story provides evidence of how RFE could serve as a communicating zone between the dissidents. (Hodosán called Levente Kasza, the broadcaster of RFE, in order to report about a house search. Gábor Demszky, who on that morning was printing samizdat materials at a secret location, was thus informed about the police harassment by listening to the radio and he could avoid returning home with the freshly printed samizdat materials.)²²

Finally the history of this relationship cast light on the important role RFE played in spreading dissident strategies. In 1980 a listener wrote to Levente Kasza, reacting to the previously mentioned conversation of the radio broadcast that included the three sociologists:

Hats off to them. Hats off, because there are just a few people in this country who are not afraid to speak up their opinion and who dare to represent it loudly, even in international forums.²³

RFE reporting about the activities of the dissidents, transmitting their own voice, sharing information about them, helped to break the barriers of fear in society and to familiarize people with dissident strategies. Reading the transcriptions of the telephone calls from 1988 for example, we can witness listeners starting to share information about the important social movements and the forthcoming demonstrations. Can we consider in this case RFE as the opposition movement's meeting space, where people were able to talk to each other? This is

¹⁸ *Interview with Levente László Kasza*; 7 May, 1989, VHS, 71 min; HU OSA 305-0-4, 8.; Fekete Doboz Alapítvány Video Archive (Fonds 305), Interviews Relating to the History of RFE/RL (Series 4)

¹⁹ *Interview with Miklós Haraszti*; 23 January, 1996, VHS, 55 min; HU OSA 305-0-4, 21.; Fekete Doboz Alapítvány Video Archive (Fonds 305), Interviews Relating to the History of RFE/RL (Series 4)

²⁰ *Interview with Róza Hodosán*; 29 January, 1996, VHS, 30 min; HU OSA 305-0-4, 21.; Fekete Doboz Alapítvány Video Archive (Fonds 305), Interviews Relating to the History of RFE/RL (Series 4)

²¹ *Interview with Gábor Demszky*; 29 January, 1996, VHS, 39 min; HU OSA 305-0-4, 22.; Fekete Doboz Alapítvány Video Archive (Fonds 305), Interviews Relating to the History of RFE/RL (Series 4)

²² *Interview with Róza Hodosán*; 29 January, 1996, VHS, 30 min; HU OSA 305-0-4, 21.; Fekete Doboz Alapítvány Video Archive (Fonds 305), Interviews Relating to the History of RFE/RL (Series 4)

²³ *The Wave Lengths of Tomorrow*, 16 March, 1980, OSZK, FM3/11921, 76.

one of the questions which has arisen in the course of my research and which needs further investigation.

It was a great pleasure for me to have the opportunity to do research at the Open Society Archives. I would like to thank the entire staff of OSA – including literally everyone working on the ground floor, first floor and second floor – for enabling me to work in a very professional yet familiar atmosphere. I would like to thank especially my supervisors, Olga Zaslavskaya and András Mink for very inspiring and supportive consultations and help, István Rév for samizdat memories, Csaba Szilágyi and Katalin Dobó for counsel, Robert Parnica and Örs Tari Lehel for navigating me through the archives and Katalin Gádoros for administrative support.