

Yehudi Lindeman

**A Conversation with Georg Lukács:
A Tribute and a Personal Memoir**

Having the good fortune of being guided by a well-connected American scholar and introduced by a prominent Hungarian author, I found it easy to obtain an appointment with Georg Lukács, on September 3, 1970. I had come out of personal curiosity, to meet the most influential Marxist critic of our time, and to question him especially about his life as a communist and private citizen, his public loyalties and his personal feelings and idiosyncracies, few of which were available through previously published interviews. Thus the visit to Hungary decidedly suited my own quest for meaning and was part of the progress of my own thinking about myself as an individual and a public being. Like so many others of my generation, I had become increasingly skeptical and suspicious of ideological positions of any kind. In my case, the fall of 1967 had marked a turning point in my relationship with the dialectical materialism and radical socialism of my 'twenties'. As I moved into my 'thirties', a brand new orientation towards personal consciousness and away from overtly political and mass solutions began to replace my earlier public way of viewing the world. It was an exciting time to be alive in America, and George Lukacs seemed just the right person to approach about some of my questions and doubts. Also, from my American perspective, Budapest didn't seem all that far away from my native Amsterdam, where I was spending the latter part of the summer.

This article was originally commissioned by another journal, but the several years' delay in publishing it, announced to me by its editor, led me to withdraw it. Its publication in this form and at this late date is intended not only as an act of historical piety to the late Georg Lukács (1885-1971), but also as a belated personal gesture towards settling, in my early 'forties, my account with the world of my formative years.

Throughout the hours that I spent in the study of his large, sparsely furnished apartment in Budapest, Georg Lukacs abandoned his precise, professorial manner only once. Professor Lukács Geörgy, as he was known to the intellectual community of Hungary's first city,

turned out to be a foot shorter than I had expected and his serious but friendly face showed much of the tear and wear of at least eighty of his eighty-five years in a turbulent world. But what struck me more than anything else was how ordinary he seemed: such Middle European octogenarians could be met in Viennese coffee houses, Amsterdam squares or tree-lined semi-urban streets in Brooklyn, New York. Yet it occurred to me that the very unobtrusiveness of Professor Lukacs' personal appearance was as carefully cultivated as it was ideologically motivated. Neutral and tidy, grey and unimpressive, the features of this minute man suggested at once one of the reasons why he had been able to survive so many political upheavals (including the lethal Stalinist purges) without much more than a scratch. His face, his carriage and his stature of barely five feet combined to give Lukacs the bookish look of a monk or reb, incapable of eventful public action, let alone subversion of the masses. Conversely, the unassuming personal appearance was accompanied by a strong sense of mission and public duty which were shown in Lukacs' frequently expressed need to show the light to a suffering and confused humanity, even while he was careful to keep himself as a person out of the picture.

It occurred to me more than once that the connection between the humble person called G.L. and Something Higher amounted to a creed, and that there might be a certain amount of wishful thinking behind the need to be an indispensable little cog in a giant, turning wheel. While downplaying his role as an individual in a Large World, G.L. denounced with impatience the frivolity of so many of the world's individuals: as though he was personally stung by the fact that precious minutes might be ticking by while people were foolishly wasting their time, thus possibly delaying the moment of the world's ultimate salvation. Indeed, G.L. very much appeared as one whose mission was messianic—a label which he waved away with his arms and obvious scorn when I mentioned it to him: “So viel Unbegriff . . .” (“What great misunderstanding. . .”.)

Even so, as we were warming up (my German being in need of some coaxing) I was struck by what continued to be the principal tendency throughout our dialogue. It reminded me, as I gazed out over the gloomy river Danube, of some of the dialogue in Budapest born author Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*: the combination of sincere humility or even self-annihilation with proudly professed self-importance in a Larger Context. I had never encountered the split between private feeling and public responsibility without being confused by it; now I heard it articulated with such candour and clarity that I felt as privileged as if I were present at a pivotal moment in the history of Western man's thinking about himself and the world. As

soon as I asked G.L. about his personal life, as in one question about his work habits, I received an indignant, even scornful reply; how self-indulgent did I expect him to be, what frivolity, what pre-occupation with personal feelings: “as though *what I feel* is of any importance whatever to the fate of the world. . .” It was easily worth the long journey by train to Budapest, to hear the living exponent of the dialectical position in my time extrapolate the position that had been the focus of most of my doubts as long as I could remember, certainly as far back as the fifteen year old adolescent, proudly singing the International, side by side with his young comrades. It was a position that I had been unable to understand, let alone endorse through personal experience, namely that individual feeling doesn’t count but only the fate of societies, as though the world consisted of factories and machines, ships and bridges, rather than human beings. I was glad that I had come and eager to record these statements in full.

But when I started the cassette recorder that I had somewhat uneasily carried with me on the train ride through Germany and Austria into East Bloc Hungary, G.L. quietly raised his hand: I had to stop the machine, or else there would be no conversation at all. Seeing that he caused me disappointment and realizing that this was an awkward moment for me (whom he endearingly addressed as “my younger colleague”) he turned around to face me (he had only shown me a half profile, so far) and explained in a kind manner that he had no intention of offending me, but that his refusal resulted from some unfortunate experiences in the past: having been “quoted” out of context on various occasions, he wasn’t about to allow any more recorded talks. He didn’t mind being misquoted, he said (pointing at the cassette recorder) provided that the responsibility for the text was mine alone, not his: “When I write about Hegel and say, Hegel is wrong, who is responsible for that statement? Clearly, I am. If you write that George Lukács is an ignorant fellow, *you* are responsible for that statement. So, if we do it *my* way, any risk or possible error is *yours*.”

And so the conversation (held in German, the translation is mine) got under way. It would last for almost four hours and my host clearly didn’t believe in wasting time: we talked right through the coffee and lunch break. G.L. left the room only twice, once for a ten minutes’ break and once for a telephone conversation in German, in the next room. I should add that I am only printing those parts of the conversation that deal specifically with G.L.’s attitude towards himself, his writing and the world, the subjects that I was most interested in asking him about.

Only during the first break did I have a chance to look around (I had been so busy listening and writing), to admire the view of the River

Danube, with the Freedom Bridge (formerly Franz Joseph Bridge) on the left, connecting Buda with Pest, and the Freedom Monument soaring high above us, on the opposite side of the river. Inside the study I noticed, among many other volumes, what looked like complete editions of Hegel and Diderot.

At that time I once again reflected how much G.L. looked like a secluded scholar. Unlike Bertrand Russell at eighty-five, G.L. couldn't easily be imagined in action anywhere outside of the confines of his book-lined study. Yet, appearances can be deceptive, I thought, recalling the story told to me by Jan Kott in Stony Brook, New York, two months earlier. As guest of the Polish Academy of Sciences, G.L. once complained to Kott about his ambiguous status: having fought and having been fought against throughout his life, he was now a retired activist who was widely respected, but not taken seriously any more. This was in 1956. Only a few months later the Hungarian revolution took place, giving Lukács a promptly seized opportunity to redeem himself as an activist. Subsequently he was jailed and barely escaped much harsher punishment after his participation, along with the double-faced Kadar, in the short-lived government of Imre Nagy.

Being keenly interested in G.L.'s relationship to the world, and most especially in the relationship between the private man and the public world, I asked him about his writing and his attitude towards it. One of my first questions concerned the languages that he used: did he have a preference? He had started out with short contributions to *Nyugat*, a Hungarian periodical. His first book (*The Soul and the Forms*) was published in Hungarian (1910) and in German (1911) respectively. What language did he prefer?

"My mother was an Austrian," said G.L., "and we were brought up bi-lingually, in Hungarian and German simultaneously. I can't remember any time when I didn't speak fluent German. I remain bi-lingual until today; though, when it comes to philosophical problems, I prefer to express myself in German." I asked if he likes to write and how he goes about it. "Do I like it?" answered Lukacs, somewhat surprised and indignant, raising high a pair of bushy eyebrows. "That is irrelevant: whether one likes it or not is of secondary importance. Anyone with a thought that he considers essential has to write, in order to give it accurate expression, so that others can have access to it. Writing is a necessity, like speaking." I said that I assumed that he writes fast and a lot of the time. Does he write every single day? Does he keep a diary? Does he feel an inner compulsion to write? How does he feel during periods when he isn't writing? "Sometimes there are months, even years, during which something is being mentally prepared. Then one and a half years of thought and reflection can some

times be written down in the period of a month. I don't keep a diary because, even though I have dealt in the past with the widest possible range of problems, I have never been pre-occupied with myself. I believe, along with Kipling, that there is too much ego in the cosmos. I like to find the truth, but I am not interested in my own individual personality. It is an instrument: I have never looked at my own personality in any other way. To lie by oneself on a couch, thinking about oneself—that is unimportant. The human personality expresses itself in the manner in which it introduces specific things into society, and in that way the generic development of mankind, its evolution, is affected and promoted. About that development we would know much less if Beethoven hadn't written his compositions. You can tell why I wasn't interested, for a very long time, in the writings of Sigmund Freud, although today I find some of his theories quite interesting. Freud's theories are sometimes quite hypothetical, as for instance in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*: it isn't true, for instance, that one fails to remember something because of one's inhibitions. It is much more plausible that one has forgotten it! I like to read the Mexico based author Erich Fromm who has made an effort to explain some of Freud's phenomena from a social angle. From a biological viewpoint a purely psychological explanation is one-sided. There is, after all, a social or sociological aspect to the way in which a child grows up, and those two can't be separated: we are dealing with dual determination.

Besides Fromm, Marcuse is not without significance. He is an honest thinker who tries to find a way out of the present crisis of our society, which is a very real and serious one. But Marcuse is a bit of a Utopian: at present there is no realistic way to get out of the impasse. The situation today is very different from the time when the Communist Manifesto showed the way. This applies as much to Eastern Europe as to the West: in fact, it applies to the entire world. Today we must deal with capitalism as it exists right now. Things have changed a lot in my lifetime, and I don't always find it easy to remember that. When all is said and done, in my childhood one could rent a horse-drawn carriage and that was about it. To my generation the automobile came a very long time later. I was twenty years old in 1905: I belong to the era of gas light."

Since we were suddenly talking about his childhood, I asked G.L. if he would care to talk about his early years, about his reaction to his parents and also about his relation to Judaism and Zionism.

"My mother was a superficial bourgeois type whom I couldn't stand at all ever since my earliest childhood. My father I respected, I idolized him from a distance, although, even at a young age, I must have been

eight or nine, I remember looking at him with a good deal of irony and compassion, because he was so short-sighted. I am talking about his inability to see what was so glaringly obvious to me, namely that my mother was a cipher, a nothing. As for my feeling towards my mother, later on it turned very quickly into indifference. With my father I had a good relationship. He belonged to what you might call the Hungarian nobility, he was the director of a large bank. There was a group of Jews who were of a high rank, socially, and my father was one of them. The emancipation of those Jews had succeeded very well, but they remained Jewish in their identity all the same. About the Zionist movement, I remember how my father used to say, yes, there may very well be a Jewish state in Jerusalem, one day, and then I will be the Jewish consul general in Budapest! As far as religion is concerned, one might call the atmosphere at home one of religious indifference. Judaism as such has not played a role in my life. My position towards anti-semitism? That has been the same as my position against facism."

In another biographical question, I asked G.L. about his extended stay in the Soviet Union, from about 1933 to 1945, what it was like to live there and how he used to spend his time.

"In Moscow I lived among a small circle of people. Do you mean to ask me how free I was in Moscow?" I nodded yes. "Though certain positions were clearly taboo, one could usually avoid those by changing the formulation of it around: that way, polemical exchanges were quite possible. One taboo concerned my book about Hegel: according to Zhdanov, Hegel was one of the principal traitors among the bourgeoisie, during the period following the French Revolution. For that reason it was impossible to get the book published. I wrote a lot during my stay in Moscow, and the company there was excellent. I was fortunate enough to escape the big wave of arrests, even though I had generally opposed the Komintern position since the nineteen-twenties. I was arrested only once, in 1941, and spent a couple of months in jail."

I then asked about any special influences on his thinking and writing: were there any specific authors? Max Weber, for instance, who was in Heidelberg while he was a student there, in 1912-13? What about literary authors, Thomas Mann for instance, or Arnold Zweig?

"I knew Gundolf well. My own development also owes a great deal to Thomas Mann. I read *Buddenbrooks* while I was still at the *gymnasium* and also *Tonio Kröger*. Any personal ties? Hardly: I met Thomas Mann in 1920 and we used to write letters to each other, that is all. Arnold Zweig I knew much more intimately. Whenever I was in Berlin, I visited him, and when he came to Budapest he would visit me. But actual influence? It is hard to tell. I think Georg Simmel was very important to me, as were some of the philosophers, but that was all in

my bourgeois period, prior to 1918. Ernst Bloch made a tremendous impression on me. I felt that he and I shared something very important: both of us were opposed to the kind of philosophy that was taught in the Universities. From what I saw of Bloch, it became evident to me that it is also possible to philosophize outside the walls of the University, just as was the case in the time of Hegel and Fichte.

The people whom I respected the most I didn't know in person. Some of the work of the Hungarian lyric poet Ady that was published in 1906 made an unforgettable impression on me and has had a lasting influence. Bartok I barely knew in person, but what a great influence he had on me! Why? As you may remember, according to Lenin the development taken by capitalism led to a split in two separate directions, the Prussian road in which the feudal element was retained and the American road in which all feudalism has disappeared. In literature there is a line that runs from Pushkin to Chekhov (and in close proximity to Gorki) which goes entirely counter to the Prussian way of thinking. The poet Ady and the composer Bartok are the Hungarian representatives of this opposition to the Prussian road, hence their influence on me. Though the subject matter of music may be undetermined, this shouldn't distract us from realizing the important part played by music: a composer is able to give clearer and more accurate expression to a period than can be done in literature. Beethoven's position vis-à-vis Napoleon, as expressed in his Eroica symphony, is much clearer than that of either Goethe or Hegel."

I asked G.L. if he could be more precise. He wasn't talking about programmatic music, was he? Lukács: "Programmatic? That is only a phrase. Monteverdi, for instance, defines his position vis-à-vis the crisis of Renaissance society with enormous clarity. Among all the Renaissance painters only Tintoretto comes close to matching his clarity of position. In the Renaissance we witness the ideological search for a solution to the problems of its society: this search is both ideological and Utopian—it is the search for a 'New World'. What follows is the development of modern capitalism. Music is especially capable of expressing this development: when we are looking for the presence of an ideology in a certain society, surely we cannot concentrate exclusively on that which is capable of being expressed verbally only."

I asked G.L. if he would care to comment on 'Utopian' solutions to the problems of individuals (if not of society as a whole) and what significance this might have, in his opinion, for the future of our world. Would he say that any new developments of lasting value can be worked out in that way? And I mentioned as an example the many young people who have chosen to live on the land instead of the city, a

'return' to the land (by living on a farm in, say Vermont or New Hampshire) that may have been influenced by the ideas of Thoreau, the nineteenth century American author. Lukács: "Utopia—that stems from a period when it was thought that the human mind was incapable of any further development. Basically, the idea comes to us from the Renaissance which treated the human mind as a homogeneous substance which is not capable of being reduced any further. And the development of something irreducible is, that goes without saying, very limited." I asked G.L. if he himself had any Utopian vision, so that he could further clarify what he meant and at the same time show what his Utopia looked like. He replied that he would love to have a room furnished and decorated entirely in old Italian style: "Surely, my study would be much more attractive that way than it is right now! But I don't have the money for this, and therefore (he chuckles) I don't have any antique Italian furniture. Utopia is that particular product of the human mind that, as the Marxists have pointed out, cannot be realized. Remember, a man who believes in Utopia does not accept society as it is. Such a man can afford the luxury of feeling very peaceful: each time he looks at himself he sees a superior human being. Some of the schemes following the French Revolution, such as those envisioned by Saint-Simon and Fourier, are good examples of Utopian thinking. They clearly belong to the capitalist era in history. Marxism, on the other hand, holds that any thought-out Utopian vision cannot possibly be realized. Marxism takes its cue from that which can be realistically accomplished within a given society.

Utopian thinking is a peculiar mode of thinking, it is an attempt to find a solution for a specific crisis in human relationships. Symptomatic for the Utopian mode of thought are the concepts and actions found today among certain groups of students in France: according to their position, work will again become some sort of play, which doesn't make sense at all. The same goes for your young Americans on a farm or commune near Boston: we are dealing here with escapes from society on the part of very small groups of people. You may, if you like, compare this to a good marriage which is also—in a small way—a kind of commune. It is a nice idea, but it amounts to an escape from society. As an idea it isn't effective at all within any given society, with its enormous ships and industries." I asked G.L. if he thought that the Utopian idea was a dangerous thing. Lukács: "No, not at all. Let me say a few perhaps rather obvious things about the reality of society as I perceive it. Our present-day society is not only a consumer society, but also one that is prestige-oriented and competitive. Individuals seem to have a manifest need to feel superior to the next person. You may take as an example an ordinary advertisement for Gaulloise cigarettes: it

seems to suggest that you can prove your wisdom by smoking Gauloise! You can prove, that way, that you are a superior person! Such an advertisement is like a drawing by Honoré Daumier in that it allows one to see the truth of an era through a caricature. Many people are willing to sacrifice their own feelings and give up their own personal interests in order to prove that they are better than their neighbors. This urge to feel superior is so pervasive, apparently, that young children while still in school are already full of dreams about doing better than their peers. If the young start out spending much of their time dreaming about competition and superiority, they will end up inventing all kinds of qualities for themselves that they cannot possibly possess in reality. It is not hard to see that the result of all this is frustration on a massive scale, something that can be seen all around us and that must be viewed as a peculiarly contemporary social phenomenon."

Next, I asked Lukács about his perception of himself as either a 'Westerner' or a representative of the 'East', a subject to which his reaction was so emotional that he completely dropped the mild aloofness that had characterized his attitude before. Referring to Arnold Zweig and Thomas Mann (whom he had already identified as a source of some influence), I asked about the degree to which G.L. considered himself as a representative of Middle European culture: one eye to the East, one eye to the West, at home in both. And then I asked, phrasing the question cautiously, what his stand-point was about this so-called division between East and West. I added that some critics obviously considered Mann as a 'Westerner', citing for instance *Tonio Kröger* as an example in support of this position, while others held that Mann was among those who tried to create a synthesis between East and West. And I asked if he thought of himself as one of those who had attempted to create such a synthesis. The response was a spontaneous outburst. "East and West? That is such nonsense, East and West, very beautiful! Gogol and Dostoevsky, for instance, they are Easterners, yes? Very beautiful. But how can one make separations in this way? Just think of the great influence that Dostoevsky has had, and still has, in the West. In that way . . . (triumphantly) the West becomes . . . Eastern. No, these are all myths, there are no East and West. All that we can talk of is the bourgeoisie, everywhere, about bourgeois society and about certain differences that exist or existed within those bourgeois societies.

Look at France and England: there feudalism was stamped out and its place is taken today by capitalism. As I said before, according to Lenin there existed, within the bourgeois world, a Prussian and an American way, a Prussian and an American road, both economically

and politically. Two roads, but not 'East' and 'West'. The Prussian road was distinctly different because of the historical fact that Bismarck never got rid of the nobility."

I asked G.L. to be more explicit about the 'Prussian road': what was the Prussian ideology all about? Still in a heightened state of consciousness, Professor Lukács gladly complied: "Thomas Mann expressed it well when he spoke about German culture as an inner nature propped up by external force." [The German term used by G.L. was "eine machtgeschützte Innerlichkeit."] "Russian authors such as Pushkin and Chekhov, but also Dostoevsky and Tolstoy were forever battling against this Prussian tendency. Even without being socialists themselves, they were opposed to and took action against this capitalistic and undemocratic culture. In no way can you call those authors 'Eastern' or 'Western'. What you find in them is a position that asserts the equality of all man versus one that believes in the basic inequality of man. In Arnold Zweig's work we may seem to find the East set against the West, but 'Eastern' here means Prussian and 'Western' refers to an idealized situation, namely that in France at the time of the Dreyfus affair. Even so, it is true enough that there are real differences between Germany and the 'West'. The Germans of the bourgeois class have always equated virtue with keeping their mouths tightly shut. Their motto was, keeping quiet is the supreme civic duty. As a result it is impossible to imagine that anything like the Dreyfus affair could happen in Germany. For the Germans to take a position in favor of the equality of all man is something unthinkable: no, that couldn't have possibly happened in Germany."

I asked G.L. to illustrate the difference between Germany and other Western nations with some other concrete examples: "Germany never followed the road of democracy to its end. It is true to say that the inequality of the Negro was accepted as a foregone fact in pre-W.W.II America. But while in the United States the question was one of equality versus inequality, in Germany it was a question of nobility versus non-nobility: it mattered if one had the right blood or not. Consequently, democracy was never able to send down firm roots there. An example? The University of Dusseldorf turned down the chance to change its name to Heinrich Heine University. The reason for this ought to be clearly understood: until this day Heine, though born in Dusseldorf, is not considered a true German: being a Jew, he remains a foreign element ["ein Fremdkörper," Y.L.] among 'real' Germans. Conversely, Heinrich Heine, of all the German poets, has exercised by far the greatest influence upon the writers of France. [With emphasis] In order to understand the course of German history,

it is essential to realize that Hitler was not an unexpected, sudden event, on the contrary: the foundations that made Hitler's rule possible were laid at the time of the defeat of the revolution, way back in 1848. In Germany we have no ordinary inequality, but an undemocratic inequality. When the great Emil Lask was killed in battle, he died as a common soldier. He could not obtain any rank, let alone that of officer, because he was a Jew. And that while almost anyone from a 'German' family could become a lieutenant. Among the bourgeois democracies, France is much more democratic than Germany. After he lost the referendum, De Gaulle withdrew from the presidency. Taking such a cue from the people would be something unthinkable in Germany. Germany's basic inequality has very deep roots. Its culminating point came with Hitler, but it is hard to eradicate it completely: it exists until today. Certainly everyday life is much better in Italy than in Germany. When a German discovers that a shirt is missing from the laundry, he shouts and raises hell. Compare to that a scene from everyday life in Florence: a shop owner is talking to a woman highly praising her son's shrewd intelligence: you should be proud of that little boy of yours, he says, he is truly a genius: every day I try to give him a little Greek or French coin as part of his change, and everyday he politely returns the coin to me. That story says something about the quality of everyday life in Italy; in Germany such a scene would be almost impossible to imagine."

Changing the subject from the quality of life under the capitalist system to that under the communist system, I asked G.L. about the everyday life of the writer-critic in a communist country: aren't they overly isolated from the rest of the world? They hardly see any foreign movies, for instance, and they don't read the foreign press while foreign books are hard to come by: doesn't that limitation in looking out result in even more limited insights? In answering, G.L. chose his words with care:

"As a generalization this may be true for a lot of critics and writers: but on the other hand, many works are available to us in translation. Many people here are quite familiar with Western literature and also, for that matter, with Western music. In other words, it is possible (though not easy, maybe) to obtain as good an insight here as it is in the West. Certain books are hard to obtain here, but not impossibly hard.¹ The works of Solzhenitsyn, for instance, are well known here. And many critics are able to tell you precisely in what way Solzhenitsyn's novels are indebted to the works of James Joyce, even as they admit that the Russian author is a great original novelist himself.

But what about the expression of their insights, I asked. Aren't your possibilities for free expression cramped by the fact that you live in a

communist state? Has this limitation affected your own ability to express yourself freely, and does this bother you? And is there any solution for this?

“Let me tell you a story about free critical expression from pre-revolutionary times. As a twenty-year old young man in bourgeois Hungary I used to write essays. So it was natural that I be hired to write theatre reviews, and this is what happened when I wrote my first review for a Hungarian newspaper. In the evening I went to see the play; and since I was both young and radical, I didn’t mince my words and wrote that it was a very bad play indeed. At 10:00 a.m. the next morning I handed in my review and at 11:00 a.m. I was fired. So much for your bourgeois freedom of speech! No, I can’t see that the limitations that exist in bourgeois society are any less severe than they are here. They are probably equally strong. I have certainly been able to criticize the official communist line sufficiently, as is clear, for instance, from my strong opposition to the views of Zhdanov. It is a fact that every society considers certain matters taboo: there are, for instance, a lot of things that the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* won’t print, period.² Do you seriously think that that newspaper would ever print an article in praise of my activities? Certainly not: each article that they print is carefully ‘adjusted’. Then that is called freedom of press. On the other hand, it is also true that I have had trouble in getting some of my works printed. Sometimes the publication of a work has taken a very long time. Thus I finished my book about Hegel in 1937, but I had to wait for its publication until 1947.³ At that time it appeared in Switzerland, but not in the Soviet Union.”

Next, I asked Lukács to comment on the role of Marxism and the Marxist ideology in the world today, particularly in relation to Western, American style capitalism, its economics and its politics.

“Let me speak plainly,” said G.L.: “the reason that I am being read in the West, is that people today are vastly more interested in communism than they used to be. Twenty or twenty-five years ago, for instance, it was still possible to ignore communism altogether. Then came the Vietnam war. After Vietnam, it was thought, it would be abundantly clear that the American way of life would be triumphant in our world: cybernetics would win, the war would soon be over, and the enemy would be defeated. But what turns out to happen? The partisans are winning in Vietnam. This is one of the reasons why there is a new kind of interest in the nineteenth century. It used to be normal to think that the nineteenth century presented us with an image that was totally passé, an image that had become obsolete, along with its theory of knowledge. Now it has begun to occur to people that it is not without interest, after all.”

I asked if that amounted to saying that Marxism was a respectable ideology today: "In the old days, people who could be trusted in other matters, and generally expressed themselves in a precise manner, suddenly changed when it came to Marx and Marxism. Take Max Weber, for instance, who is able to announce, without further explanation, that Lasalle's right of the labourer to the proceeds of his own labour simply doesn't work in practice, period. It was only with regards to Marx and Marxism that people felt free to say whatever they wanted. Another example: according to Theodor Adorno, Georg Lukács, in *The Destruction of Reason*, called Freud a fascist. There is no ground whatever for this accusation, for Freud isn't even discussed in *The Destruction of Reason*. Normally decent scholars could only indulge in such nonchalance in relation to Marxism, for Marxism didn't count, it was *hors de loi*. Now this has begun to change: nowadays people must behave just as decently in matters concerning Marx as in all other matters. The fact is that the nineteenth century and its issues have a great deal of actual significance. Far from being obsolete, the problems of the nineteenth century are very relevant. Insight into those problems is of much aid in solving the problems that face us today. It is in this sense that the past twenty years have been a great step forward."

NOTES

1. Before leaving, I asked G.L. what I could do for him. He asked me if I could get him a French copy of Andrei Amalrik's book *Will the Soviet Union Survive until 1984?*
2. The widely respected German newspaper, comparable to the *New York Times* or *Washington Post* in the U.S.
3. *Der junge Hegel (The Young Hegel)*, Zurich, 1948.