

On February 7-8, 2020 The New School held a [symposium](#) to celebrate the life of **Ágnes Heller** (May 12, 1929-July 19, 2019), philosopher, Hannah Arendt Professor, Emerita at The New School for Social Research (NSSR, formally known as the Graduate Faculty of Political and Social Science). We would like to share with you one of the pieces presented at the symposium by one of Ágnes's friends, **Judith Friedlander**, former Dean of NSSR and author of the recent book, [A Life in Dark Times: The New School for Social Research and Its University in Exile](#), published in 2019 by Columbia University Press. It is an important book for all of us, and a very good read!

*Ágnes Heller had a special connection to TCDS and we know that our alumni and friends who studied or worked with her would appreciate the present essay. Ágnes taught at our annual **Democracy & Diversity Summer Graduate Institutes** in Wroclaw, Poland, and many TCDS alumni are her students. TCDS also presented her with the **Courage in Public Scholarship Award** in 2016. Judith gave the introductory remarks at the ceremony that took place in Wroclaw.*

*After making a few personal remarks, Judith describes the life of Ágnes Heller in the spirit of the good people Ágnes wrote about in *The Philosophy of Morals*.*

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# GOOD PERSONS EXIST

**BY JUDITH FRIEDLANDER**  
**FEBRUARY 2020**

I met Ágnes Heller for the first time at the New School, in the fall of 1993, the year I became dean of the Graduate Faculty. She had just given notice that she was moving back to Budapest, together with her husband Ferenc Fehér. Exiled since 1977, the celebrated dissidents were eager to go home to a new democratic Hungary, recently liberated from Communist rule. Ágnes had other, less uplifting, reasons for wanting to leave that I will not discuss here, other than to say that she was furious with the New School over matters that preceded my arrival. Had it not been for the persistence of her good friend, Richard (Dick) Bernstein, she would have broken all ties with the university. In the end, she agreed to continue teaching for one semester every year—a decision she never regretted. On the contrary.

A few months after they returned to Budapest, Ferenc died of a heart attack, leaving Ágnes to build their new life without him. But she was never alone. In addition to her family, thousands, if not millions,

embraced Hungary's most revered philosopher and public intellectual. Former dissident scholars, who were now in a position to do so, appointed her to the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and reappointed her to the faculty of Eötvös Loránd University, where the Communists had expelled her in 1956 for supporting the Hungarian Revolution. Beyond the academic community, she received invitations all the time to appear on television and radio and to speak to Jewish organizations.

In the years after Ferenc died, Ágnes traveled more than ever, throughout Europe and around the world, giving lectures to academics, politicians and cultural groups, while continuing to write prodigiously, producing a book almost every year, for scholars and the wider public. There was also the New School.

Between 1994 and 2009, Ágnes met, in one semester, the teaching obligations that full-time members of the Graduate Faculty met in two. She served on countless dissertation committees as well, frequently as chair. It was during those same busy months in New York that Ágnes and I became friends. Then after she retired and sold her apartment, she began staying with me on her annual visits to see all of us, often on her way back from Brazil, Argentina, or Mexico.

Our times together on West 106<sup>th</sup> Street were beyond precious. We talked and talked, shared books and ideas, went to museums and the opera, entertained and visited mutual friends. During those visits, Ágnes spent her days reading, preparing lectures, meeting students and colleagues, going to yet another exhibit, and shopping for books and clothes, before reconnecting with me for a night on the town. Over the years, we also travelled to Mexico together and met up with one another in Paris. I also visited her in Budapest. In 2014, when Ágnes turned 85, her son Gyuri (György Fehér) invited me back for a big birthday celebration. Unable to go, I promised myself that I would make it for her 90<sup>th</sup>.

Ágnes was in great form in May, as full of life as ever. Every morning at 7:00 AM, we went down to the swimming pool in the basement of her apartment building and swam vigorously for half an hour. Between appointments with Hungarian and foreign journalists eager to interview her in the days leading up to her birthday, Ágnes and I walked all over Buda and Pest, visiting museums, going to the opera and a concert, attending one festivity after another, organized by colleagues, students, family and friends. These included a moving tribute to Ágnes at the embattled Central European University and, most spectacularly, a surprise party organized by Ágnes's daughter Szuzsa for 120 of Ágnes's closest friends.

On May 13, the day after Ágnes officially turned 90, she and I took an early morning train to Innsbruck, where she gave a talk that evening on empathy—in German, and without notes. We then parted ways the next day—Ágnes for Vienna to participate in a round table discussion with politicians about the upcoming European Union elections. A week later, we caught up with one another in Paris, after she had lunch with Emmanuel Macron and a small group of European intellectuals, whom the French president had invited to the Élysée Palace to talk, once again, about the elections. Then in June, Ágnes went to the UK to give a lecture at the University of London and to see her granddaughter Lilly who had missed the festivities in Budapest because she had to take final exams. Back in Budapest, Ágnes spent the rest of June and early July finishing the last volume of her history of philosophy for Hungarian students, before taking off for her annual vacation on Lake Balaton, where she stayed, as always, in a lodge owned by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. This time, however, with a heavy heart, because Viktor Orbán's Fidesz Party had succeeded a few weeks earlier in passing legislation that severely weakened the Academy's authority over Hungary's scientific institutions. On the 19<sup>th</sup> of July, Ágnes set out for her daily swim, which always lasted for over an hour. But this time something went wrong and she didn't return.

I, like everyone else in this room, am still in shock. Thank you, Dick (Bernstein) and Dmitri (Nikulin), for offering us this opportunity to remember Ágnes together.

Although I am not a philosopher, I, like so many others, responded immediately to Ágnes's work. Ágnes touched readers from widely different academic backgrounds and levels of education because, I believe, at the risk of oversimplifying, she never hid behind screens of obfuscating prose. Ágnes wrote the way she talked and she talked the way she lived, with courage and integrity. She crafted her sentences in an inviting style that guided you along, every step of the way, as she examined questions that always mattered.

Ágnes was not only a great and accessible philosopher, she was a good person, a subject she examined philosophically. Not that she would have ever recognized herself among those she described as good. But I do.

As Ágnes put it, "Good persons exist. How are they possible? The human condition makes their existence possible. Good persons even exist now, she continued: "How are they possible – now? The existential choice of goodness makes them possible." This, Ágnes tells her readers, she can show. But she cannot show how people choose themselves to be good existentially. Because, she explains, this "cannot be shown... at least not 'by causality.'" Instead of demonstrating how or why people choose existentially to be good, Ágnes shows by example, introducing us to good people and, in her words, accompanying them in their lives.

In *A Philosophy of Morals*, the second volume of her trilogy on ethics and morality, Ágnes accompanied her father in his life. With your indulgence, I will try to accompany Ágnes in hers, not as a philosopher, but as an anthropologist, historian and friend. In doing so, I rely on a number of different sources. Among them, her own autobiographical reflections about her life, which she modeled, she tells us, on what she learned from her father. I also rely on the reflections of others who have written about Ágnes and on my own experiences with her, including several hours of recorded conversations about her life, fragments of which I published in my history of the New School. Ágnes read what I had written about her, carefully and critically, correcting factual errors and flights of fancy along the way.

According to Ágnes, her father, Pál Heller, and paternal grandmother, Sophie Meller, taught her what it meant to be a good person: "Until my university years, it was my father and my grandmother who influenced me the most, both intellectually and morally. I included them, or their characters, in my books on ethics...I learned about politics from my father as early as the age of four, and about the love of books from my grandmother Sophie when I started school." They both died in 1944—Ágnes's father in Auschwitz, her grandmother of natural causes a month before the Germans occupied Hungary.

Ágnes's father came from an educated Austrian Jewish family; her mother, Angyalka Ligeti, from a family of petit-bourgeois Hungarian Jews. They had "absolutely nothing in common," Ágnes recalled, but they got along very well because neither one of them liked to fight: "Both of them had an inclination to happiness, to treat themselves well. Life was a constant celebration. When it was cold, my father made a fire."

Ágnes's parents shared their enthusiasm for life with their daughter. Her father, in particular, always made her feel special and encouraged her to set her sights high. She should become a composer or a philosopher. "I used to love to hear my father say these crazy things," she laughed, "because they were the most unlikely things for a girl to do." Her own dream was to become a scientist like Madame Curie.

Pál Heller was a lawyer by training, but he rarely practiced his profession. Had he been born later, Ágnes added, people would have called him a "hippie." He enjoyed doing everything but making a living. Her mother was the one who supported the family, working as a milliner. It was she who cared about money, even though she earned very little.

In the eyes of his daughter, Pál Heller “was such an interesting man,” but he lacked direction. Like an old rabbi, Ágnes continued, he read a lot, solved mathematical problems, played the piano, and wrote novels. One of which even got published—a detective story involving the theft of radiation, which was still an original idea for a plot in the interwar years. Among her father’s unpublished novels was one based on the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti: “Of course, he wrote that they were totally innocent.”

Although Pál Heller was politically progressive, he had no sympathy for socialism or communism. He wanted to live in a democratic society, Ágnes explained, one that valued the rights of individual citizens. Since his circle of friends in interwar Hungary leaned farther to the left than he did, he remained a loner with no political community. Until 1933: “The first thing he fit into was anti-Fascism. He was active then.”

Ágnes’s father joined a group that provided false passports for Jews and Gentile political refugees, helping them, when possible, to get out of Europe. Since he looked like an Aryan and spoke excellent German, his group of anti-fascist activists sent him to Germany on special missions. During those trips, he ate only in restaurants that refused to serve Jews, as a matter of principle he said, taking great pleasure in breaking the law, Ágnes added admiringly.

The Hungarian government did not wait for the rise of Hitler to impose restrictions on its Jewish citizens. In 1920, Hungary became the first country in interwar Europe to limit the number of Jews it permitted to attend university. Wealthy Jews responded by sending their children to Fascist Italy, noted Ágnes dryly, without commentary, letting her silence fill in the blanks. Then in the summer of 1939, when Ágnes was 10 years old, Hungary extended the *numerus clauses* to secondary school students, introducing the policy 15 months before the nation had officially joined the Axis alliance with Germany Italy, and Japan.

The government of Miklós Horthy announced the new policy a few weeks before the beginning of the academic year, clearly timed to cause as much chaos as possible for the thousands of families who then had to scramble during the last days of August, to find an opening for their children in private Jewish schools, which, having had no previous warning, did not have enough places for everyone. Thanks to an aunt who taught at one of these Jewish schools, Ágnes was among the lucky ones. And so began her formal introduction to Judaism and Jewish culture that her secular parents had never intended to pass on to her.

Once a friend asked Pál Heller why he had not converted to Christianity, since he did not believe in the Jewish God anyway? Because, he replied, he did not believe in the Christian God either, nor did he believe in abandoning a sinking ship. Not that it would have helped had he done so. Ferenc Fehér’s parents had converted, but the family still ended up in Budapest’s Central Ghetto because his grandparents were Jews.

On March 19, 1944, the German army occupied Hungary. A month later, on April 14, Nazi soldiers arrested Ágnes’s father and, seeing his passport, turned him over immediately to the Hungarian authorities. Because, Ágnes explained, the Germans “were a law-abiding people.” When the Hungarians saw that Pál Heller was Jewish, they sent him to a camp in Hungary “and from there, on June 20, to Auschwitz.”

Pál Heller had no illusions about what was going to happen to him. Preparing for the inevitable, he wrote his last will and testament several weeks before the Germans arrested him. His words appear in the preface to *A Philosophy of Morals*, as evidence, Ágnes explained, that “in this book I have invented nothing. I have only written variations on the theme that had been passed on to me by my father”:

My dear daughter, Agi,

When you think of me, please remember that if you choose the path of love you will live a life filled with harmony and abundance. All you need is a little more luck than your father had and everything will be all right....In spite of what has happened over the last years, I have not lost my

faith.... Evil may be victorious for now—but goodness will prevail in the end. Every good person contributes a speck of dust to that final victory.... Please keep friendly and joyful memories of me.

A philosopher Ágnes explained does not invent a moral philosophy. “He merely describes moral acts and moral behavior which he regards, in his world, as the most exemplary,” modeled on people he has known. In her case, she modeled the “acts and character of ‘the good man’ on my father.... I chose to follow a decent person in his life’s way, beginning from the simplest choices in everyday life up to the ultimate moral conflicts, the borderline situations. Not all men go this way up to the end. My father did.”

In May 1944, the Jews of Budapest were forced out of their homes and moved into specially designated “Yellow Star” houses, the first phase before herding most of them into a hastily constructed ghetto. On certain days of the week, between 11:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m., Jews had the right to leave these houses and go into the main part of the city to do their marketing and take care of other business, a so-called privilege that came with risks attached, as Ágnes and her mother quickly learned. One day, when they ventured into town, members of Hungary’s special police rounded them up, together with thousands of others, and marched them down the main streets of Budapest in a long procession to the railway yards, where trains were waiting to take them to Auschwitz. Nobody, or so it seemed, paid very much attention.

As the police pushed them forward, Ágnes positioned herself and her mother alongside the tracks of the tram. Trams were passing by at regular intervals, traveling slowly enough for an agile teenager to hop onto the last car, which was always open. Even though there were guards everywhere, Ágnes urged her mother to risk jumping with her. They would never shoot at them, she gambled, out of fear of killing a Gentile passenger instead. As they leaped on to the open car, the passengers stepped back, making room for them to land safely. Ágnes and her mother stayed on the tram for a few stops, until they reached the one closest to the Yellow Star houses, at which point they hopped off and dutifully returned to their crowded quarters, having no other place to go.

By the middle of October, the Soviet army had surrounded all but the western border of Hungary, across which the occupying forces had begun their retreat. Assuming that the war would now end quickly, Horthy tried to switch sides, announcing over the radio on October 15 that he had surrendered to the Allies. The German authorities responded by arresting Horthy’s son, after which the regent quickly stepped down, ceding the leadership of the country to the more reliable Arrow Cross, the Hungarian Fascist Party.

A few weeks later, the Arrow Cross ordered the Jews of Budapest to get out of the Yellow Star houses. They had only a few days to pack up what few belongings they still had. Anyone who missed the deadline would be deported on the spot. The vast majority of Budapest’s Jews were crowded into the newly constructed Central Ghetto. Those with special papers issued by the Vatican, Spain, Sweden, or Switzerland were cordoned off in so-called “international houses,” located outside the walls of the ghetto. Although Ágnes and her mother did not have special papers, a woman they knew sent them to the underground headquarters of a Zionist group, where forgers were distributing fake Swiss passes.

By the time they had their papers, it was very late. Rumor had it that the Arrow Cross guards were tearing up the passes of Jews who had waited to the last minute, sending them empty-handed to the Central Ghetto. Even those in possession of “authentic” papers were no longer safe. Anticipating the worst, Ágnes began scheming again, assuming responsibility not only for herself and her mother, but for three other families who were in the same predicament. They would only get through, Ágnes reasoned, if they arrived at the international houses in the company of a German soldier. No Arrow Cross guard would question a Nazi, or so the 15-year old girl wanted to believe. At least it was worth a try.

Ágnes looked around for a member of the Wehrmacht. She knew better than to approach the SS. A soldier standing by himself, beyond the reach of peer pressure, might respond like a decent human being and agree to accompany the little group. Her plan worked, and they entered without difficulty. As a university student after the war, she came across a haunting line in Bertolt Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle* that reminded her of this decent German soldier: "Terrible is the temptation to be good" ("*Schrecklich ist die Verführung zur Güte*").

The fake passes bought Ágnes and her mother about a month of relative safety. Then, in the early days of December, Arrow Cross guards started rounding up Jews protected by Swiss papers. Before deporting them to camps in Austria—the Russians had blocked the way to Auschwitz by then—they marched them over to the Central Ghetto, where, systematic to the end, the occupied forces and their eager Hungarian assistants recorded the names of every one of them. When Ágnes and her mother reached the front of the line, the girl began arguing with the guard: The Arrow Cross newspaper had announced, she told him, that the Germans were only deporting women between the ages of 16 and 45. Since she was 15 and her mother was 46, they should leave them behind. Ágnes was making such a nuisance of herself that she attracted the attention of another guard, who urged his colleague to let the scrappy teenager and her mother go and get on with his work.

When the guard threw them off the line, Ágnes felt triumphant and guilty at the same time, she confessed. She and her mother had escaped deportation, but how about the others? Not that she had very much time for soul searching. She had to get herself and her mother back to the international houses, something, once again, they could not do alone.

Hoping that her earlier strategy would work a second time, Ágnes approached a young Arrow Cross guard who told her to go to hell. She then tried an older guard with a kind face and he agreed to help them.

During the final weeks of the war, Ágnes concluded that the fate of Jews who had remained in Budapest was no better than that of those deported to camps in Austria. The Arrow Cross guards began rounding up people at unpredictable intervals from both ghettos and made them walk to the Danube, where they shot some of them in full view of the others, then marched the terrified witnesses back to the ghettos, only to repeat the same routine a few days later. "This became sort of a game," Ágnes said, which she and her mother miraculously survived, on two separate occasions. Back in the ghetto, they faced near starvation—"a perpetual Yom Kippur"—until January 17, 1945, when the Soviet army liberated Budapest's Central Ghetto and International Houses.

Between 1945 and 1947, Ágnes completed her last two years of high school. Graduating with top honors, she entered university in September 1947, dreaming of becoming the next Madame Curie. Then, several weeks into her first semester, she abandoned chemistry and physics for philosophy, or more precisely for György Lukács. In later years, Ágnes enjoyed recalling what can only be described as an adolescent coup de foudre:

"I had a boyfriend who was a disciple of Lukács, and he wanted me to accompany him to one of his philosophy classes. I told him, 'I'm not interested.' Philosophy was not a real science, and I wanted to be a scientist." Finally, to please him, she agreed to attend a lecture in Lukács's class on the History of the Philosophy of Culture. As she sat there, she continued, "I didn't understand a word of what he was talking about." She had the sense, however, that it was not only important, but "the most important thing in the world." She had to understand. She had to learn this "new way of thinking," which was so different from the kind of problem solving she had learned to do in her science and math courses. What excited her about Lukács was the idea that the philosophical questions he raised persisted. They had no real answer. No

formulas, no set of rules. No matter how clever philosophers were, they returned to same questions, over and over again.

When Ágnes entered university, she was not interested in Hungarian politics, she said. Uncharacteristically, she merely did what was expected of her and joined the Hungarian Communist Party. But after she became Lukács's student, she became an "avowed Marxist." Because, Ágnes added, with youthful conviction, "Since Lukács was Marxist, and I became his disciple, I became a Marxist." And not only a Marxist, but a Communist. This still made sense in 1947, she explained, at a time when the party had just attracted 1,200,000 new members who enthusiastically embraced it as the party of the people with utopian ideals. Two years later, during "a so-called party cleansing," it lost its wide popular appeal. "This was the beginning of the Stalinization of the party, when 400,000 Hungarian members were expelled." Among their many targets, the authorities accused Lukács of being a "revisionist." Although they did not throw him out of the party, they banned him from teaching for a year, punishment that had the desired effect of scaring away his large following. When he returned in 1950, two students were waiting for him, Ágnes and the same boyfriend, István Hermann, whom she had married the year before. Having remained faithful to Lukács, Ágnes "was demoted to a so-called temporary party membership, because," she explained, "they considered me 'not reliable' and they were absolutely right."

During the late 1940's and early 1950s, the curriculum for students majoring in philosophy stopped with works written before 1848. Lukács and his colleague Jozsef Fogarasi taught the European canon from Plato to Feuerbach. The authorities did not allow them to teach the works of Marx or his followers. Students interested in Marxism had to major in "a separate department called the Department of Marxism and Leninism, which was controlled by the party." But even there, nobody taught Marx—only Lenin and Stalin. Ágnes began studying Marx seriously on her own after 1956, as a political dissident.

Looking back on her days as a student, "The greatest luck of my life," Ágnes wrote, "was to have become György Lukács's disciple. Without him, I never would have become a philosopher....I cannot even think of this possibility; retrospectively I am scared even to mention it. Lukács influenced me thoroughly, especially in the beginning." But even then, as a young student, she maintained her independence.

Lukács wanted Ágnes to write her doctoral dissertation on aesthetics; Ágnes wanted to write on ethics. If she insisted, Lukács countered, she should do her thesis on the ethics of Lenin. Again, she resisted, eventually persuading her mentor to let her examine the works of the Russian writer Nikolai Chernyshevsky. Lenin, after all, had relied heavily on his writings, even borrowing the title of Chernyshevsky's novel, *What Is to Be Done?*, for his own famous treatise on the question. In deference to Lukács, Ágnes added a note to the preface of her thesis explaining that she had written on the ethics of the pre-Marxist Chernyshevsky in preparation for working next on the ethics of Lenin. But she never followed through because, as she put it many years later, "the ethics of Lenin did not exist." She wrote her second thesis on the ethics of Aristotle.

After receiving her doctorate in 1955, Lukács appointed Ágnes assistant professor of aesthetics and the philosophy of culture in the Faculty of Humanities at what is now called the Eötvös Loránd University. Defying tradition, she introduced students to philosophical works written after 1848, noting proudly that she gave the first courses ever taught in Hungary on phenomenology and existentialism, focusing, in particular, on the works of Husserl and Kierkegaard. Although Lukács thought that this was a colossal waste of time, he did not stop her. On the contrary, he and his colleagues rewarded her for her independent spirit by appointing her as the first postwar editor of *The Hungarian Philosophical Journal*. Then twelve months later her university career in Hungary abruptly came to an end—until after 1989.

Ágnes has described 1956 as the “the year of great hopes.” Speaking for herself and Ferenc Fehér—whom she married in 1963—Ágnes wrote, “Our most beautiful and most enduring political experience is tied to 1956.” Enduring, certainly, in terms of the impact it had on the rest of their lives, but the Hungarian Revolution lasted only 18 days, from October 23 to November 10. When Prime Minister Imre Nagy formed his coalition government that fall, he included respected intellectuals like Lukács, who belonged to the Communist Party, but who shared Nagy’s desire to create a multiparty political system in Hungary.

After the Soviet army invaded the country and crushed the new government, the authorities arrested Nagy and his ministers, including Lukács, and deported them to Romania. A year later, in 1957, they released Lukács and allowed him to return to Budapest, sparing him the fate of Nagy and other members of his inner circle. But they expelled him from the party.

When he returned to Budapest, Lukács acknowledged his errors and retired into private life. Several years later, in the early 1960s, the party reinstated Hungary’s most famous philosopher, allowing Lukács to enjoy the respect, if not entirely the trust, of the Communist establishment during the remaining years of his life. He died in 1971 at the age of 86.

When Lukács fell out of favor with the party, his disciples fell out with him. In 1956, Ágnes was expelled, not merely demoted—and this time for good. Even more damaging, she lost her professorial post at the university and her job as editor of *The Hungarian Philosophical Journal*: “I could not enter the gate of the university,” she recalled, “until 1990. I was considered poison for university students.” Two years later, the authorities gave her a job in a high school where she taught Hungarian language and literature. “Not a bad exercise,” she admitted, even though, at first, she dreaded the idea of having to teach 22 hours a week: “I was afraid I wouldn’t have time to do philosophy, but somehow you always have time, if you want to do something.”

For several years after 1956, the authorities did not let her publish anything other than prefaces to new editions of classic philosophical texts. Things eased up in the early 1960s, when the party rehabilitated Lukács and, as an additional gesture, permitted his favorite student to publish some of her own work. Then, in 1963, thanks once again to Lukács, the Institute for Sociology gave Ágnes a research position. But she still could not teach at the university. That same year Ágnes, Ferencz, György Márkus and Mihály Vajda founded the Budapest School of Philosophy.

It was also during this period that Ágnes and the other members of the Budapest School, “entered the world,” as she put it, almost imperceptibly at first. Their writings appeared in Serbo-Croatian translation, then slowly in other languages. In 1965, philosophers in Zagreb and Belgrade invited Ágnes to attend their international summer school in Korčula, which had opened in 1962 and was attracting leftist intellectuals from all over Europe and the United States, including such luminaries as Habermas, Herbert Marcuse, and Leszek Kołakowski. As Ágnes described the gathering, “They were all leftists, but of different kinds; all were anti-Soviet (albeit not necessarily also anticommunist); and they all wanted to get rid of the burden of the Soviet type of ideology in Marxism.... It was into this discourse that I was thrown in August 1965, and I did not leave it for more than a decade.”

When she received the invitation to go to Korčula, Ágnes applied for an exit visa. She already had a passport, but to leave the country she needed a visa. When dissident intellectuals applied for permission to attend a conference outside Hungary, the Interior Ministry usually gave its consent, but then delayed issuing the visa just long enough to make sure that the applicants missed their events. In this way, nobody could accuse the government of denying exit visas to outspoken critics of the party. This time, however, the authorities miscalculated and issued the visa too early—having not noticed that the program lasted for two weeks. Ágnes arrived after she had been scheduled to speak, but the organizers slipped her in at another

time. Her talk, “Value and History,” made such an impression that the German political theorist Iring Fetscher described it at length in the article he wrote about Korčula that summer for *Die Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*—Fetscher, incidentally, came to the New School in 1968 as a Heuss Professor. During that same visit to Korčula in 1965, the Serbian philosopher Gajo Petrović asked Ágnes to join the editorial board of his new journal, *Praxis*, whose philosophical orientation, in those days, had much in common with the Budapest School.

In 1967, Ágnes published *Everyday Life*, which went on to become her most widely read book. At the time, however, it took several years for it to reach the West and did so only after her next book, *The Theory of Need in Marx*. Anti-Stalinist Italian Communists were the first to publish translations of both of them. Editions in other languages quickly followed. With these two works, Ágnes attracted a wide following among New Left intellectuals in Western Europe.

During the summer of 1968 Ágnes went back to Korčula, together with four other colleagues from Hungary (György and Maria Márkus, Vilmos Sós, and Zádor Tordai). As Dick Bernstein described the gathering that year, “Everybody who was a significant leftist in the East and West” was there, including “all the leaders of the student movements in Germany, Eastern Europe, and the United States.” And they were still meeting on August 20, when Soviet tanks rolled into Prague.

Taking advantage of the relative freedom they had in Yugoslavia, the five Hungarians wrote a declaration against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, separate from the collective statement signed by everyone present at Korčula. Identifying themselves as Hungarian intellectuals, they criticized the shameful collaboration of their country and the other members of the Warsaw Pact. They then succeeded in getting their “Korčula Declaration” into the hands of a journalist from Agence France Presse, who turned it over to *Le Figaro*. The newspaper published it three days later.

Protected by Lukács, Ágnes and her colleagues did not lose their jobs over this last provocation, but she did lose the right to leave Hungary. The authorities lifted that restriction only once, in 1971, when Lukács fell seriously ill and was beginning to fail, in order to get her out of the way for a little while. They were worried, apparently, that in his fragile state of health, Ágnes might persuade Lukács to appoint her the executor of his manuscripts and other papers, something the government wanted to prevent at all cost.

And so, with the blessings of the Hungarian government, Ágnes came to the United States in the spring of 1971 to give a talk in a conference at the City University of New York (CUNY) on the Marxist distinction between theory and practice. Since she hardly spoke any English, Andrew Arato, who had become her good friend in Budapest two years earlier, when he was writing his dissertation on Lukács, served as her translator and guide. As Andrew took her around New York and accompanied her to Boston, where she gave another talk, he told Ágnes about the New School for Social Research and its University in Exile. Fascinated by the story, she was particularly interested to learn that the founding dean of this university in exile was Emil Lederer, who had been a good friend of Lukács and, through Lederer’s wife, a member of his family.

Ágnes got back to Budapest in time to see Lukács before he died. Out of respect for the nation’s leading philosopher, the authorities allowed him to see her. But once Lukács was gone, they took their revenge against Ágnes and the other members of the Budapest School.

In 1973, high-ranking members of the Communist Party staged what came to be known as “the Philosophers’ Trial”—not that they actually held a trial. Dispensing with any semblance of a judicial process, they expelled the leaders of the Budapest School from the Hungarian academic community, accusing them of being “right-wing deviationists.” The party had just passed a new resolution that year requiring members of Hungarian universities and scientific institutes to demonstrate their allegiance to Marxist-Leninism. “Anti-Marxists,” the resolution stated, “had no place in Hungarian academic life.”

Ágnes “loved that sentence,” she said. It was “comic.” More than comic, it was “ridiculous.” Perhaps, but the ruling held. György Márkus and Mihály Vayda lost their positions at the Institute of Philosophy; Ágnes and Maria Márkus, at the Institute of Sociology. Although the authorities spared Ferenc, he quit his post at the Institute of History in solidarity with the others.

Unable to work—not even in a high school this time—or publish anything at all, Ágnes and Ferenc tried to emigrate. Their situation, admittedly, was better in Hungary than it would have been in Poland or Czechoslovakia at the time, where dissidents like them were doing time in jail, but it was still intolerable. They wanted to get out.

Leaving the country had become slightly easier after 1975, when Hungary signed the Helsinki Accords, which recognized the rights of citizens of East European Communist countries (with the exception of Albania) to emigrate to the West if they had a bona fide job offer. But to get a job offer from most academic institutions in the Free World, the top candidates were expected to appear on campus for a final round of interviews, requiring those who lived behind the Iron Curtain to apply for exit visas. Requests by dissidents were rarely granted.

In 1977, Ágnes’s friend, Iván Szelényi, heard about an opening in the Department of Sociology at Latrobe University in Melbourne, Australia. The sociologist had gone into exile in 1974 and was teaching at Flinders University in Adelaide. From his base in southern Australia, Szelényi applied for the position on behalf of Ágnes. The department chair at Latrobe replied immediately, saying that he and his colleagues were delighted to learn that Ágnes might consider a position at their university. If she would agree to an interview, they would gladly pay all her expenses, a generous offer, but useless, given the visa problem. “Finally,” Ágnes explained, “they understood” and sent their colleague John Carroll, who was spending his sabbatical year in Vienna, to visit her in Budapest. On the basis of that interview, Latrobe gave Ágnes the job, which then made it possible to get a permanent exit visa for herself and the entire family. Ágnes’s mother, however, did not want to leave, nor did her daughter Zsuzsa. Only Ferenc and their son, Gyuri, joined her. Before long, the Australian academic community made Ferenc an offer as well.

From Australia, Ágnes and Ferenc moved to the New School in 1986. Since Dick, Andrew, Dmitri and Ágnes’s students have and will continue to describe Ágnes at the New School, I leave that to them. Skipping ahead to her return to Hungary, after Ferenc died in 1994, Ágnes opened a new chapter in her life, which she called her “wandering years, . . . without trying to imitate Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister.” In addition to teaching at the New School and in Hungary, she started giving lectures and intensive seminar courses in Europe, Australia, Asia, and Latin America, responding to invitations from former students in the early stages of their careers and from distinguished colleagues. Despite all the travel, she continued writing at a feverish pace, mostly on aesthetics— finally accepting the advice of Lukács.

Beginning in the 1990s and until the day she died, Ágnes won dozens of awards and medals in recognition of her scholarly contributions, including the highly prestigious Sonning Prize. Her last major recognition was the Nietzsche Prize, awarded posthumously in October (2019). Ágnes also won countless awards for her political courage and work as a human rights activist. She was particularly moved, she said, when in 2008, the Czech Republic thanked her for the stand she had taken after the Soviet invasion in August 1968.

Over the years, Ágnes remained politically engaged as a public intellectual, appearing frequently on television and radio and writing articles for liberal magazines and newspapers. In the second decade of the 21st century, admirers, like the political scientist András Bozóki, described her to *The New York Times* “as a model of a freethinker and free citizen. . . [who] believes it is the role of intellectuals to engage civically, much like Hannah Arendt.” But she also had many enemies, some of whom were politically powerful and

attacked her viciously for standing up against the government of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, whose right-wing Fidesz Party had been running Hungary since 2010.

While Orbán and his supporters continued to chip away at freedom of the press and other rights protected in liberal democracies, they targeted Ágnes and her friends in the media and challenged them in court. In 2011, they accused her and Vajda of having embezzled government research funds. The judge dropped the case for lack of evidence the following year, but the harassment of the so-called “Heller’s Band” continued with smear campaigns sponsored by *Magyar Nemzet*, an influential paper on the extreme right. Defying them to the end, Ágnes continued to speak out until the day she died, as many of us here saw last spring when we read her magnificent article, “Hungary: How Liberty Can Be Lost,” which Arien Mack published in *Social Research* (vol. 86, no.1).

To conclude, as I accompanied Ágnes in her life’s way, I focused primarily on the choices she made in borderline situations. But good people, Ágnes teaches us, are decent in the simplest choices they make in everyday life. Allow me to end with an example:

Ágnes, we all know, was a great teacher and lecturer, admired for her philosophical writings all over the world, not only among intellectuals and other members of the cultural elite, but also, I discovered, among primary school teachers in rural Mexico, who for decades have been reading *Everyday Life* as part of their normal school curriculum. I learned this astonishing fact in 1999—astonishing that is to a provincial academic like me, who thought she knew something about the educational system in Mexico.

My own ties to Mexico reach back to 1969, when, as a doctoral student I spent a year doing ethnographic fieldwork in Hueyapan, an indigenous community in the State of Morelos where the inhabitants speak the language of the Aztecs. During that year, I lived in the home of a formidable old woman, her primary school teacher son, his illiterate wife and their 11 children, one of whom went on to become a disciple of Ágnes Heller. When I first met Maribel Vargas Espinosa she was a spunky five-year-old.

Forty years later, Maribel was teaching primary school in the State of Mexico, in a town near Texcoco, and on her way to earning a doctorate in education at the main campus of the National Pedagogical University. She was also giving classes to primary school teachers in an annex of the National Pedagogical University in the working-class city of Ecatepec (Unidad 153). I, by that time, was serving as Dean of the Graduate Faculty. Although many years had passed, we had never lost touch.

One day, in the fall of 1999, I gave Maribel a call to see how she was doing. After giving me the latest news from Hueyapan and her family, she told me that she was taking a course in philosophy and ethics. Whom was she reading, I asked, “Perhaps you know one of them,” she replied. “She lives in New York. Her name is Ágnes Heller.” “Of course, I know her,” I said, adding teasingly, “I’m her boss” (“soy su jefa”). Never one to let me get away with a wisecrack, Maribel countered, “Why do intellectuals like you only hang out with one another? Why don’t you engage seriously with people like me? We need to hear from one another.”

Humbled by her response, I asked Ágnes if she would come to Mexico with me to meet Maribel and give a lecture at her university. Ágnes accepted immediately. Although she had been to Mexico many times before, she had only spoken to students in elite university settings, confirming Maribel’s accusation. Mutual friends at the New School had already told me that our colleague was revered throughout Latin America, as she was in Europe and other parts of the world. But I still had no idea that her reputation extended to primary school teachers in Mexico.

By 1999, eighteen of Ágnes’ books had been translated into Spanish. And the more Maribel read, the more she wanted to learn about the work of this Hungarian philosopher. When the time came for her to

select a topic for her MA thesis, she decided to analyze the way she and her colleagues trained primary school teachers in Ecatepec through the lens of Ágnes's concept of "everyday life." She then elaborated upon Ágnes's ideas in her doctoral dissertation, where she focused specifically on the experiences of students who spoke indigenous languages.

When I told Maribel that Ágnes had agreed to come to Mexico, she shared the good news with her professor (Luis Eduardo Primero Rivas) who then organized a conference around her visit on "Educación, Humanismo, Postmodernidad: Presencia de Ágnes Heller." The event itself consisted of a full day of presentations by members of the faculty and student body, capped with a keynote address, by Ágnes herself on "Why Democracies Need a Cultural Elite" a provocative subject to say the least for this decidedly left-leaning audience. Although Ágnes offered the assembled a welcomed critique of the ways modern capitalism had distorted the ideals of democracy in places like the United States, she did so in terms that made cultural relativists uncomfortable.

The conference attracted over 100 professors and students, the majority of whom were more enthusiastic about Ágnes's earlier work, when she still identified herself as a Marxist, than with her later writings. And they did not shy away from telling her so, as they challenged Ágnes's presentation, politely but forcefully. Welcoming a lively exchange, Ágnes responded in kind. In the days following the conference, two articles appeared in *La Jornada*, the nation's leading left-leaning newspaper.

Although Maribel was delighted with the event, this was not what she had in mind. When she originally asked me to invite Ágnes to come to Mexico, she warned that it would not be enough for her to speak to students at the National Pedagogical University, on a lovely campus located on the outskirts of Mexico City. She expected Ágnes to give a second talk in Ecatepec for far less privileged students, who were preparing to teach primary school in remote parts of the country. Ágnes happily complied. The following day, she addressed over 500 aspiring teachers, making the case once again that democracies needed a cultural elite.

Almost everyone in the Ecatepec audience came from rural villages like Hueyapan, from communities that had little in common – one would assume—with Budapest or New York. Yet the questions students asked made it abundantly clear that the writings of Hungary's leading philosopher spoke to them directly. Drawing on their impressive familiarity with her work, the students in Ecatepec asked Ágnes to help them deepen their understanding of her ideas as they sought new ways to address the challenges they faced teaching impoverished children in remote areas of Mexico. The exchange was breath-taking.

Ágnes being Ágnes, she never lost touch with Maribel. Sixteen years later, in 2015, a Polish sociologist, based in Mexico City, who had studied briefly with Ágnes at the New School, invited his former professor to give a series of seminars at the National Autonomous University and to participate in a conference about her work. When Lukasz Czarnecki asked Ágnes to recommend scholars who might participate in the conference, she suggested, among others, Maribel. Which is why a paper by Maribel Vargas Espinosa now appears in a volume published last May by one of the leading houses in Mexico (Siglo XXI), alongside nine essays by Ágnes Heller, another by Elena Poniatowska, Mexico's most beloved living writer, and essays by several members of the nation's academic community (*Ágnes Heller: ¿Revoluciones en la vida cotidiana? A 50 años del Movimiento Estudiantil 1968*). What a gift this was for Maribel. Not that Ágnes ever thought that what she had done was anything out of the ordinary. And, of course, it was not in *The Everyday Life of Ágnes Heller*.