

FICTION THROUGH THE AGES

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**CROSSING BORDERS: MEMORIES AND IDENTITIES
OF ERWIN NAGY (1930–2022)**

My topic is the memories and identities of one “ordinary” man who wrote an interesting autobiography: Erwin Nagy, *Past in my memory* (2001). It was originally written in Russian and translated into German (2008) and Japanese (2020).

I would like to tell you about Erwin Nagy and his memoirs because his life makes us reconsider the meaning of “crossing borders” and its influence upon the self-identities of human beings. In the 20th and 21st centuries we have gotten much more chances to cross various “borders” than in previous centuries. That is a result of modernization and the globalization of the world. A lot of people started to think they can cross such borders that existed among them and have started to venture across them. For example, we are doing an online seminar between Ukraine and Japan which we would never have dared to try just a few years ago. But the pandemic and new online technology have made it possible, and even ordinary, for such things to spread out for more general consumption.

But we should remember that it used to be (and sometimes still is) difficult to cross borders (political, social, cultural, racial, sexual, and so on). In my opinion, as we read Erwin Nagy’s memoirs, we will get a chance to consider how crossing borders might influence one’s self-identity and how memory gives his/her pasts new meanings.

Let me first tell you how I met Erwin Nagy. In 2010 I spent some ten months in Berlin on a sabbatical. One day a colleague of mine at Saitama University, professor Toshino Iguchi, emailed me from Japan and asked me to be an interpreter of Russian. She specializes in the life and work of a Hungarian architect and artist László Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946). She wanted to have an interview with his nephew who lived in Dusseldorf, Erwin Nagy. But she found that Erwin’s native tongue is Russian, and she remembered that I was in Berlin. So, I went to Dusseldorf to see Professor Iguchi even though, at the same time, I was wondering why a Hungarian artist’s nephew speaks Russian.

It is a part of a biography of László Moholy-Nagy and his family. László and his younger brother Akoš who were recruited when the war began between Habsburg Austria and the then Russian Empire in 1914. László was wounded on the front and came back home while Akoš was taken prisoner by the Russian Army in 1916. He bore witness to the Russian Revolution in 1917 in a Siberian prisoner camp. Instead of going home, a young, energetic man believed that a new country with socialist ideals would give him a broad field of activities. As a devoted communist he entered the Communist Party and chose journalism as his profession. He changed his name to Aleksei Lvovich Nagy. He married a Jewish Ukrainian, Fanya Zak,

and had a son, Erwin, in 1930. Then the Communist Party decided to send Aleksei to Japan as a correspondent. In 1931 Nagy's family came to Japan, which was at that time a Samurai country which traditionally had a complicated relationship with the Russian Empire and the USSR.

That is the reason why Erwin Nagy's native tongue is Russian. But he mentioned to us that he was a bilingual when he lived in Japan. His parents hired a Japanese girl as a housekeeper and a nanny for Erwin. Unfortunately, he lost his Japanese after returning to the USSR as his relatives prohibited him from speaking Japanese in public at that time for obvious reasons.

I decided to translate Erwin's book because his memory about pre-war Japan is so vivid and surprisingly meticulous that it is worthwhile to read especially for Japanese. Let me introduce some episodes from his life.

“A Happy Childhood”

As his father worked as a correspondent of TASS (Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union) and his mother as a staff member of the Soviet embassy, Erwin was taken care of by a Japanese nanny during the day. He remembers especially well “Yuni-san” who lived in his house for seven years.

Erwin tells a funny episode about her. One day he caught an octopus on the beach in Kamakura where they lived in the summer vacation. He took it home with much joy and excitement. In the evening Yuni-san cooked it for her and showed him the dish. Little Erwin was very shocked:

Not because I felt pity for the octopus, but because I was afraid Yuni-san would be poisoned to death. I asked her not to eat it in tears, but she said warmly, “This is very delicious! Actually, you liked it when I cooked it before. Please try and you will remember the taste.” But it was impossible. It is one thing that they give you something cooked on a plate and another that you catch a wild animal from sea. “I see. If you are so worried about me, I won't.” And she took the dish to the kitchen. I don't know if she ate it then. But I think this event made me hate fishing and shooting all my life. (Hagi 2001: 35; here and hereafter translation by Nonaka)

But a child's life is not always innocent and idyllic. Little Erwin had some experiences which made him conscious of political life. One day he was going to visit a friend's house with his nanny. He saw two Europeans standing by a motorcycle. Erwin wanted to watch it more closely. He then noticed that the men were talking in Russian. But he felt that they were somewhat different from Russian adults he saw at home or at the Soviet embassy. He got more interested in them than the motorcycle:

“Hello (Zdrastvujte)! ”

They got silent and looked at me. “Hello. — they said suspiciously — Who are you? What's your name? ”

“My name is Fagi Nagy! (Erwin's parents called him Fagi when he was little). ”

They looked at each other. Maybe a combination of my strange name and natural Russian surprised them.

“Where do your parents work? Who are they? ”

“My daddy is a correspondent, and mummy works as a Trade Representative.”

“Of *them*,” a motorcyclist said and continued to talk with his friend while they despisingly paid no attention to me any more.

In Japan adults treated children very warmly regardless of social class or origin. Political opinions were not applied to children. My childish babbles about Red Moscow or “the happiest country in the world” could provoke from them admiration, ironical smile or surprise, but they never showed a sign of hostility.

Perhaps it was the first time I felt a clear hostility the reason of which I could not understand. And some words showed up in my mind — not at once but very slowly, as if an image shows up when you develop a film. *Whiteguards! Enemy!* I knew that they lived in Japan. Naturally, I couldn’t fight with them by myself. The Japanese nanny standing with me, of course, wouldn’t be a help. I got scared and left them very slowly. Then me and the nanny went to Nelya’s house. (Hagi 2001: 20)

In 1930s about 1500 white emigrants from Russia lived in Japan while Soviet citizens were only about 250. So “white” Russians were much more than “red” ones in Japan. Actually, emigrants were sometimes depicted in Japanese novels of pre-war time as they symbolized political helplessness or freedom in difficult situations.

Erwin’s first contact with a “political enemy” went without a serious result, but it left a strong impression in his mind.

Return to “the happiest country of the world”

I am sorry that I have to omit many episodes about his life in Japan which Erwin recalls with vivid impression. As a small child he remembers especially well hobbies and entertainments such as swimming at Kamakura beach, fireworks, flying kites, Japanese traditional holidays and so on.

Nagy’s family left Japan in November 1937. Aleksei was called back to Moscow to take another post in the TASS. Erwin told his American and Swedish friends that he was going back home. A girl named Benita said to him that they would be able to meet again because Sweden was “near to Russia.” Erwin made a political correction: “Not Russia, but USSR,” as his parents as devoted communists told him that it was forbidden to call their country Russia.

A few days later me and Benita and her little brother Fred enjoyed making a bird nest in a park, as her elder brother Erick rushed to us by bicycle. As usual, he rode at a high speed along a 100 meter long wall with his hands off the handle. He jumped off from the bicycle, made it stand by, and talked to me.

“Fagi-chan, are you going back to Moscow? Really? ” (they talked among themselves in Japanese — S. N.).

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“Yes, we are leaving soon. ”

“When Benita said that you are leaving, my dad frowned and said that your father would be arrested in Moscow. ”

“That’s impossible, Erick-chan! My dad is a red communist! ”

“But my dad said that if they call back your father, he will be definitely arrested. They arrest all people in your country now. ”

When we had dinner, I reported to father the opinion of Wilfred Fleisher (Erick’s father, an American journalist — S. N.). Father’s reaction was unexpected. He slapped me on the face and told me never to repeat such a foolish story. (Наги 2001: 38)

Actually, Erwin’s parents had some worry about returning home. They tried to hide it from his son.

I also remember a visit of Tatyana Grigorievna and Nelya. Our mothers sent us to play in another room for ourselves while they talked with each other for a long time in a study. When they left, mummy came to me with an anxious expressoin. It seemed to me that her eyes had a trace of tears. Much later, in the Soviet Union, she told me that Tatyana Grigorievna very carefully made her understand that something incomprehensible and evil went on in the Soviet Union. The thing is that they did not receive any news from colleagues who went home, and those who came to Japan instead of them knew nothing about them, never saw them and couldn’t tell anything about them. They simply disappeared without a trace. Tatyana Grigorievna even hinted a possibility to think twice of our destination. The most terrible is that my mother herself felt all those things. (Наги 2001: 40)

Of course, seven year old Erwin did not understand totally what the adults were worried about, but he also felt a lot of things. He depicts that he suddenly understood he would never see his international friends and Yuni-san when he parted with her at the harbor. One part of his life ended and the other did not start until the ship reached Vladivostok in three days.

Excitement and Embarrasment in Homeland

Nagy’s family came to Vladivostok and then went to Moscow by Siberian Railroad. In Vladivostok they met Fanya’s younger sister and her family who lived there. Erwin met his relatives for the first time: an aunt, an uncle and a cousin. Raya was a thirteen year old enthusiastic Pionerka (a member of the Communist youth organization).

Raya was a girl with soviet enthusiasm and unshakeble belief in the absolute superiority of her Homeland to all the capitalist world. She enlightened me with an inspired mood as to the achievements in the country, entertaining activities of Pioneer and Komsomol groups at school, all sorts of circles and Pioneer summer camp. Raya regarded it her obligation as a Pionerka to immerse me into an atmosphere of enthusiastic construction of a bright future so that she might dissolve all harmful sediments accumulated inside

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me for many years in the hostile capitalistic Japan. But it seemed to me that what she talked about did not match her very modest clothes, the view of the town, and most importantly, the gloomy look of people I saw on the streets. They never showed any disposition to communicate so that I would not have liked to talk to them or ask a question or do me a favor. That was unusual and alarming to me. (Наги 2001: 44–45)

In Moscow, Nagy's family found an apartment and started a new life. It was very interesting for Erwin to see a lot of new things, but he sometimes got confused by a gap between what his parents told him in Japan and what he actually saw in the USSR.

One day when I was alone at home, our landlady saw me in a corridor and asked me quietly.

“Tell me, Erik, who are you?”

I was used to such a question in Japan. But here in Moscow...? But I answered proudly as I did in Japan.

“I am a Soviet boy,” and added, “You know that, don't you!?”

“Of course, I know”, answered the landlady, “But Soviet boys can be various — Russian, Ukrainian, Jewish, Georgian...”

This news was a big shock to me. How can it be? One of the virtues of our homeland is that we all are equal, we are the same Soviet people. But it seems they also distinguish people by some signs I didn't understand in the USSR!

In the evening I felt worried and asked mummy.

“Tell me who I am — an Ukrainian or a Jew?”

“Not a Jew, but a Jew,” she said, “As you know, a lot of different peoples live in the world. In the USSR also live different peoples, but they do so very friendly.”

The other day I told the landlady who I am.

“I thought so,” said she. My first contact with a national problem ended that way. (Наги 2001: 48)

As we are running out of time, let me summarize what happened to Erwin and his family then. His father Aleksei was arrested as a Japanese agent and executed (Erwin and his mother did not know the fact officially until 1955). His mother Fanya took his son to her sister who lived in Kharkov with the fear that she also would be arrested. So Erwin lived there for some months. Fortunately, the disaster passed by his mother. When the war started in 1941, Erwin evacuated with her to Siberia. But his grandparents and an aunt who had remained in Ukraine were killed by the Nazis. After the war Erwin and Fanya went back to Moscow where he grew up. He graduated from the Moscow Institute of Energy and became an engineer. He got married and had a happy family. They went to Germany in 1992. He lived with his family in Dusseldorf. Only recently did I receive the news that he passed away at the age of 91.

What does Erwin Nagy's biography make us think about? As we see, Erwin had various identities. His father was a Jewish Hungarian, and his mother a Jewish Ukrainian. He was born and raised as a Soviet boy. He was conscious of it while he lived in Japan as a

foreigner. After returning to the USSR he started to have more differentiated identities (or sub-identities) he had not known before: those of Jews, of urban people, of a *people's enemy's* family.

It is important to note that these identities constantly changed their significances depending on the time and the situations in which Erwin lived. For example, he strongly felt his Jewish identity when his friend told him he could not enter Moscow University of International Affairs because he was a Jew. Or he felt he was an urban boy when he evacuated to a remote Siberian village and lived in a village for three years.

Meanwhile we should remember that Erwin's changing identities were somehow "typical" for Soviet people because many of them also had such experiences concerning the formation and transformation of their self-identities.

It is also important to note that memories play an essential role in the formation and transformation of identities. As Erwin recalled his life, he gave it new meanings from today's point of view. On the other hand, his memory is not only individual but also collective. It is to a certain degree a "family history" or an "ethnic history" which they keep by sharing memories and stories.

Finally, I would like to add that I saw some Japanese paintings and dishes and paintings in Erwin's apartment in Dusseldorf. He and his mother kept them for many years. As he said, it was very dangerous to have such things during the Stalinist time, but they could not dispose of them. I felt that those old paintings and dishes were a symbol of his "happy childhood". In that sense we can say that Japan also has some role in the formation of Erwin Nagy's self-identity.

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