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ON THE ROAD TO DEBRECEN WITH GINSBERG AND COMPANY

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1

On the Way to Debrecen

We are going to Debrecen in my dilapidated Lada. On each front fender of the car there is a hole. Whenever it rains, I plow between two fountains. Before getting in, I show Ginsberg the holes, but the sight leaves him indifferent.

There are no fountains now. It is snowing instead, the first snowfall of the year. It started the night before. I got home from Kaposvar at 6:00 in the morning and at 10:00 we set off for Debrecen. For the time being, I'm not tired, but my nerves are taut. Evidently, the mere fact of the trip is exciting enough to keep me awake. Until I met him a few days ago at the Astoria hotel, Ginsberg was a mythical figure for me, rather than a living man. I read his poems for the first time in Allen's beat antology after I was released from prison, in the winter of 1960. Fascinated and repelled, I read these poems, straining my biceps on the huge dictionaries. I decided to translate Kaddish, hoping to rid myself of the mass of conflicting emotions which these unprecedented poems aroused in me. The translating, however, dragged me even deeper into confusion. Every part of me protested against the Ginsbergian torrent of uninhibited spontaneity. At the same time I sensed that this lack of restraint was a fight for freedom carried out for the open expression of feelings. Then much later, the form underlying and regulating the spontaneity fascinated me. The author's perfect poetic pitch, his methods of building thought-rhythms which transformed with ease the epic elements into poetry, shaped the form.

Since we cannot see out the window, we are completely dependent on each other, as if we were in a cell. There is no world outside; only four men closed up together and the weather. The athletic Orlovsky is sitting beside me; behind him is Ginsberg, next to Ginsberg the young Steve Taylor who accompanies them on the guitar and participates in setting to music the poems that will be recited. In fact, all of them have guitars; Ginsberg has even brought a harmonium.

Of course, I know that Ginsberg and Orlovsky have been living together for decades. I read and translated some of Ginsberg's poems on the subject. Due to their blunt language and detailed and exact description of physical acts, they cannot be published here. These poems radiate a

personal and devout passion, an obsession and monomania that are encountered only in the greatest love poetry of world literature. This passion lifts the verse above the double scandal of homosexuality and pornography and reduces—at least to my mind—moral outrage and prohibition to ludicrous Philistine caviling. We're bumping along in the car. From time to time, Ginsberg absent-mindedly and casually strokes Orlovsky's long hair tied in a pony tail. I'm wondering whether we're going to get to Debrecen without a major scandal. I know that they sometimes get carried away in mad public demonstrations, either to shock the bourgeois or to assert their existence. Before we left, Ginsberg even asked me what kind and degree of scandal I would consider tolerable from the standpoint of the authorities. I replied that I would leave that up to them. They were aware of the political and sexual taboos that had developed in this part of the world. At any rate, they didn't have to take me into consideration. My answer was sincere, yet I wouldn't have minded getting to Debrecen without mishap. At the word *taboo*, Ginsberg immediately asked why the words *fuck* and *cock* are, for the most part, missing from the Hungarian translation of his poems. The first day, he had asked about the Hungarian equivalents for these words and was told that other words—as he understood—imagistic expressions were substituted for them. I alluded to the Catholic traditions rooted in feudalism into which, due to lack of decisive bourgeois revolutions, even bourgeois radicalism could not make a breach and to which every government, perhaps for the sake of peace and perhaps from inclination, must conform even though it professes a revolutionary ideology.

We advance, bumping along, though the word *advance* has hardly any meaning in this "fog before me, fog behind me" region. We are wrapped in a curtain of snowy rain. The windshield wiper does its job reluctantly and hesitantly. No one speaks a word. Only Orlovsky says that it's too bad he can't see the road, for he is a farmer and the sworn enemy of chemical fertilizers. We stop once and get out. Orlovsky determines that the soil is very rich and asks whether we use chemical fertilizer. He acknowledges my answer with a dissatisfied shake of his head.

We move on; I am thinking about the enigmatic pair, Ginsberg and Orlovsky. The beardless Ginsberg, with his gentle, compassionate rabbi smile, the resigned light of aging in his eyes, can hardly be reconciled with that mad and maddening figure of a scandal-maker which his name and fame evokes in us. As for Orlovsky, the first adjective that occurs to one is "masculine." I received a copy of their jointly written book, *Straight Heart's Delight*, which Gay Sunshine Press, San Francisco, had published in an attractive edition. The first page shows the two authors in a photo taken in 1963. They are naked, their arms around each other in a brotherly embrace. In this book, made up of their love poetry and correspondence, Ginsberg tells the story of their relationship. They fell in love tempestuously in 1954; then after a while, they got married in an early morning ceremony

in a coffeehouse. "We made a vow to each other that he could own me, my mind and everything I knew, and my body, and I could own him and all he knew and all his body; and that we would give each other ourselves, so that we possessed each other as property, to do everything we wanted to, sexually or intellectually, and in a sense explore each other until we reached the mystical "X" together, emerging as two merged souls. We had the understanding that when our (particularly my) erotic desire was ultimately satisfied by being satiated (rather than denied), there would be a lessening of desire, grasping, holding on, craving and attachment; and that ultimately we would both be delivered free into heaven together. And so the vow was that neither of us would go into heaven unless we could get the other one in." Now in the car I understood that they had reached that state of peace and love free of passion that they had set as their goal a quarter of a century before. The road till now must have been very rocky.

"We had times of hostile screaming at each other such as happens in the worst of homo- and heterosexual marriages, where people have murder in their hearts toward each other. That burned out a lot of the false emotion of youth, and the unrealistic graspings, cravings, attachments and dependencies. So he's now independent and I'm independent of him. And yet there's an independent curiosity between us."

Obviously, it's easier to describe something like this, than to live it. For the time being, I just sense the atmosphere of physical and spiritual well-being, the almost anxious concern, free of pathos, for each other's needs.

I feel a sudden urge to talk about myself. As long as we are closed up in this common, mobile cell, it isn't proper that I know so much more about them than they know about me. They listen with surprising attention to my intentionally laconic biography. Even Steve Taylor, who has excelled in the art of being unobtrusive, hiding behind his faint smile and thin-rimmed glasses, becomes animated and asks some quick questions. Steve's and Peter's questions are naive; they simply want to check whether they had understood what I had rattled off in my fantastic English. In contrast, Ginsberg's are expert and probe the essential. He asks about '56, prison, the Jewish problem, and literary life. Then he lists the Hungarian writers he knows. Why is it, he asks, that here everyone is afraid of something worse? He quotes a writer colleague of mine: "Intellectuals in Hungary can only follow the tactics of non-interference."

"Do you really only stand to lose?" he asks, uncomprehending.

I try to explain that the alternative of the "lesser evil" is such a deep-rooted tradition here, since, in the past, Hungarians were at once oppressor and oppressed. The powers-that-be forced the people to accept the latter by reinforcing the former. Later, when there was no longer anyone to oppress, they forced Hungarians to accept the prevailing situation by throwing

them bones and promises. This historic situation had made such a deep impression on the mentality of the people that the government had to rely on it even after the historic change. And it could depend on this mentality, because history after 1956 has truly only presented the worst alternatives to the existing situation.

Ginsberg nods. Obviously, he finds this logic fantastic. He quotes a few phrases that he has stored away; he compares his experiences with my words. Orlovsky too nods, then asks whether I'm tired. We're already between Szolnok and Debrecen. The noises of the car resonate in my spine; it is as if we were quivering in a jelly-like medium.

2

The Literary Evening

The condition of inner freedom can be attained only by degrees. First, the desire to follow our own laws surfaces. Most people give this up and conform to patterns of behavior considered to be normal. The efforts of parents, schools, and the mass media all tend toward this end. The child is pushed into the anus of an extremely complicated system of pipes and squeezed through the sieve of a regulating system of threats and promises. By the time he comes out the other end of the pipe, he is as different from his original self as is a pig from sausage. In the first stage of freedom, one seeks one's real needs and tries to distance himself from conventional expectations. Then when he starts on the road to satisfying his real needs, he generally tries to assert himself aggressively and provocatively, like the child shouting in the dark that he is not afraid. At the third stage, he follows the promptings of his deeper self with a passionless passion. Instead of behavior, he offers being to himself and his environment.

This third stage manifested itself when we were led backstage of the Debrecen theatre. The audience, of about 500, mostly young people, were already sitting in the theatre. At that moment, Ginsberg who felt the call of the audience, started toward the curtain carrying his guitar and mini-piano. Orlovsky and Taylor followed him with a natural calm. The directors made a desperate attempt to hold them back.

"But we have to install the amplifiers," said Ginsberg and crossed the demarcation line of the curtain. I jumped after him, saw him greet the audience with a slight movement of his hand, and immediately begin to adjust the microphone. Growing bold, I too made my preparations; I lay the necessary paraphernalia on the ground: the Ginsberg volume, the journal, *Nagyvilag* (Wide World), my Ginsberg translations (in manuscript), and four poems by Orlovsky which I had translated into Hungarian the previous day at Kaposvar. By this time, the other two Americans had

broken through the magic circle, adjusted the amplifying equipment, and, by metacommunication, established contact with the audience that was watching with growing amusement. Thus, the usual solemn entrance, the march in single file to the podium, the audience's polite applause, the guests polite bow, well-shaped introduction, poems in English, in Hungarian, applause, poems, applause, closing speech thanking the audience–none of this took place. Ginsberg's entrance–he did not intend to create a disturbance, he was only understandably eager to begin doing what he had to do–frustrated the director's conception, not only because of this unusual entrance but because, from the outset, they rejected the guest's role. They were professional showmen who felt at home on the stage. This familiarity was a sign of inner freedom: a man who is sure of his identity is at home everywhere. (The next day for example, at my wife K's farm, after a delicious dinner of stewed goat with paprika, the exhausted Orlovsky lay on the bed and immediately fell into a deep sleep. Ginsberg sat cross-legged at the foot of the bed, played his mini-piano and sang poems to K. They radiated an aura of intimacy which is the reward of freedom. It was as if they had lived there since time immemorial.)

The poems which I presented in Hungarian translation and which they had set to music were applauded frenetically. This success did not slacken when they turned to Blake, whom Ginsberg is very eager to set to music and sing. In 1948, he thought he had heard Blake's voice in a mystical, visionary state. I could say that, though their success had its source in the poetry, it became independent and was connected more to their personalities. It surprised Ginsberg that he was so popular here as well as in Yugoslavia, which they had just visited. He later pumped me about what I thought was the reason for his astonishing success. I replied that he embodied an attitude of revolt, an unconditional and unconventional spontaneity that attracted young people everywhere; but in our part of the world, this attraction was coupled with an aura of inaccessibility and romantic nostalgia. That evening, I observed the effect on the audience of the uninhibited enthusiasm radiating from their performance, and the sexually and politically taboo free speech. It wasn't necessarily what they said that created the effect, but the way in which it was said and the fact that it was said at all. The audience was amused by them, and perhaps to some, they appeared as clowns; but behind the laughter and the amazement lurked the wondering and joyful question: "So this is possible?"

During the second half of the evening–Ginsberg spent the intermission besieged by autograph-seekers–the poets answered the audience's questions. Now the difference in the minds of the two poets became clear. Ginsberg had a hair-trigger mind; he immediately grasped the essence behind the question and answered, sometimes with irony, sometimes with a certain passion, but always with great elan. For example, a young man,

with an insulting edge in his voice, asked if Ginsberg had experienced only ugly and repulsive things in America. "Wasn't there something there that one could love" he asked.

Ginsberg said quickly, "Of course there is. I love the great American black culture, the poetry and music of American blacks. Anyway, I like the poetry of young America."

The next day in the car he asked what kind of fellow had asked him that question.

"A nationalist," I replied, "who considers you a homeless bastard."

"Aha," said Ginsberg. "Then I did right to praise black culture. That's like answering that question here by praising the Jews, isn't it?"

Some of the questions concerned his role as a poet. How did he feel ten years after the passing of the beat decade, now that he was no longer the leader of a living movement? What was the source of his passion, now that there were no troops to lead? Ginsberg replied that the poems of his youth, "Howl" and "Kaddish," which had made him famous, lay in a drawer for years, gathering dust. For that reason alone, they could not be considered the pronouncements of a leader. For a long time, the important thing for him had been to listen to that inner voice and by expressing it, to know himself and bring out everything that had been lurking in the shadows. It was another matter that others could identify with what he, the unknown, solitary beginner had dug out of himself. But at the time, this had not interested him in the least. What had concerned him was to bring out that which erupted from the depths and perhaps, a little, to earn the approval of Jack Kerouac. His attitude toward writing had not changed to this day. Now too, he simply wanted to express himself; the change in world view had not altered this desire. When asked what he thought of the world situation, Ginsberg turned serious, even gloomy. He did not allow himself playful allusions, as before, when he referred to his love for Kerouac. He explained that, in his opinion, the basic problem of the times was not the opposition between capitalism and communism, but the fact that industrial civilization had immensely increased the accumulation of wealth and power and, along with these, nuclear weapons. Humanity had developed this accumulation for 200 years but there weren't 200 years to dismantle it, if only because man had lost control of his own handiwork. He believed that mad world systems were rushing headlong toward death. He and Orlovsky had sat on the rails leading out of a nuclear weapons factory and had sung Buddhist songs. They were arrested several times, then they were released. Of course, they did not think that these actions would really prevent the shipment of plutonium; they simply wanted to draw attention to the extreme peril. From their attitude radiated the concern for their personal salvation: even if the world was destroyed, they would not cooperate in this destruction.

Further questions shed light on the fact that Buddhism also had similar roots. In their opinion, Buddhism had nothing to do with religion. Ginsberg, for example, emphasized that he was an atheist. He told us that the nine-year-old son of his teacher, a Tibetan lama, whom he had mentioned in his verse and orally as his guru, had asked his father whether there was a God? At the guru's negative answer, the child breathed a sigh of relief and showed with his hands what a load had dropped from his heart. As Ginsberg acted out this scene, he had to wait for the waves of laughter to subside; only then did he explain that the philosophy of life behind Buddhism, the practice of introspection and contemplation made them and their followers impervious to the influence of the prevailing ideologies, their propaganda and the mass media. This answer convinced me of something that I had long suspected, that this Buddhism was an act of self-defense. It wasn't the philosophy itself that was so important as its ability to preserve personality.

The next day after we left the farm and set off for the village near Vac where the Hoboes Blues Band had invited Ginsberg and Co. to shoot a film-sequence. I asked Ginsberg in the humid darkness whether he really thought that he could blow away capitalism and state-socialism and everything that threatened humanity with his Buddhist breathing. Ginsberg leaned forward and said in a ringing voice, "Particular solution, isn't it?" I nodded, but added that it was so only if you take humanity as a whole, it is obviously living and alive for those whom it saves.

"Then what isn't particular?" asked Ginsberg. "Poetry, perhaps?"

"Poetry isn't particular," I said. "But it can't solve the problems of the world."

"Apparently, we agree on the negatives," said Ginsberg. "But what kind of positive, non-particular solution do you propose?"

"Are you thinking of a solution," I asked, "that would end the excessive concentration of power and material means?"

At Ginsberg's positive answer, I took refuge in silence. I did not come forth with the great socialist utopia and the ideal of a society that governs itself, because in the Year of Our Lord 1980, on our wet and muddy trip in the pitch-dark, I would have been ashamed.

In contrast with Ginsberg, Orlovsky completely lacked the inclination to abstraction. He reiterated what he had to say with extraordinary oratorical force, he spoke vividly and with humor, but he never left the solid ground of facts. When someone asked him what he had felt when he volunteered to care for lepers in India—one of his occupations is hospital nurse—Orlovsky could only gape. "What do you mean what did I feel? I nursed them."

"Still, how did it feel to be among lepers and to see their suffering?"

At this Orlovsky related how the wagons filled with lepers passed through Indian cities, I believe he mentioned Bombay. He described how

the lepers stretched their hands through the canvas begging for bread. He spoke, using strong images, objectively and concretely. When again he was asked, how he had felt nursing lepers, Orlovsky looked at Ginsberg, begging for help. Ginsberg angrily jumped up. "He didn't have noble feelings," he shouted. "He simply washed them, fed them and talked to them; he helped in practical ways. I can assure everyone that he had no abstract, humanitarian feelings at the time!" Orlovsky nodded vigorously. I had the impression that even then the question had not penetrated his consciousness. He was interested in the lepers, not in his own feelings.

He behaved in the same way when asked about his poetry. To illustrate, I will quote one of his poems.

My Mother Memory Poem

My mothers very funney some times,
when I was 17teen she told me
she sucked my gigger when I was 3 months old
and sucked my dildo in frunt of my father
and he got jelous she said and he told her to quit having fun.

I always loved that storey and tell it fast whenever I can
to sweet friendley girls.

This poem always caused great amusement. Several people, however, were obviously shocked when they asked the author why he had written it. Orlovsky was incapable of grasping the question. "Because it happened to me," he said. "It happened, though my mother later denied having said anything like that to me."

"But why did you write a poem about it?"

"Because it happened," repeated Orlovsky. "I always write poetry about things that have happened to me."

Another poem aroused even greater consternation.

AMERICA, GIVE A SHIT!

New York City—Get Your Shit Together

You have to sit and think this thing out Peter—
How maney pounds does my city shit and piss a day?
How do we scoop it all up—collected?
and composted and brought back to farms
where it belongs all along.
It's a great job and my pay is human manure,

I want a hundread pounds an hour
because I'm a hard worker,
or should I ask for more?
Always wanted to dig with a shovel
in front our East Side Manhattan apt.
I know worm droppings are 15 dollars a pound.
I'll have to go study cities sewage blue prints
and dream of vacuum-flush toilets.
Remembering Allen and me walking to East River around 17th Street
and there we saw the sewage flow about 2 feet deep
out 6 foot diameter tunnel
slowly moving melting into East River.
What interesting surprise brown flow discovery,
on its way to East Rivers garden floor.
Even cows don't throw away their plop
but let it drop
near many eating pasture spots
and next year dung turns into better green grass than before.
Organic Gardening Magazine gets excited about reporting
China's engenuity in recycling 99% of the human manure
of Shanghai's 14 million population
while Chinese farm girls in the field sing
odes to human dung
while raking more dried human manure
into the ground under persimmon fruit trees
as their babies sit nearby on the ground looking up
at clear blue sky
listening to mama's human fertilizer song.

1977 NYC

Although even this poem was given an enthusiastic reception, partly because of Orlovsky's brilliantly executed performance, there were more protesters than in the case of the poem about his mother.

"Why did you write this?" "Why is this a poem?" "What did you want to say?"

Orlovsky explained that only organic fertilizer can save the soil—and malnourished humanity—from destruction. He reeled off statistics on how much artificial fertilizer makes how much land infertile for how many years, how many vitally necessary worms it destroys and so on. Then they asked him, "What did he mean by mentioning China at the end?" "Did he know for a fact that scientists scraped the fertilizer under the trees with their fingernails?" "Why did the Chinese mother sing joyfully at the

end of the poem?" Orlovsky explained with growing impatience that he didn't mean anything by mentioning China; he had simply read in a popular American gardening book about the process in Shanghai whereby they conducted human excrement to the land, and he considered this to be a very rational solution to the problem. The questions came thick and fast; Orlovsky again stared at Ginsberg. "They are curious about the ideology, Peter," he said, "The ideology behind the poem."

"There's no ideology," Orlovsky explained. "The thing is that artificial fertilizer ruins the soil; such and such an amount of chemicals destroy the soil for such and such an amount of time. For example, the vitally important worms. . . ."

At the end of the evening, Ginsberg, who didn't want to create a scandal in Debrecen, taught the audience Buddhist breathing exercises. About 500 people were sitting in the hall, and we four were on the stage. We took the body position Ginsberg prescribed and began to look and breathe in the prescribed way. I didn't know to this day whether he wanted to help bring about the best physical state for meditation and introspection or whether he enjoyed getting the Debrecen audience to do such an unusual and forbidden act in public. When the breathing exercise was over, the evening came to an end. It was getting late and the theatre workers wanted to go home. A young man in the first row stepped up to me. "An Istvan Eorsi," he said with devastating scorn, "doing Buddhist breathing exercises."

I got hot. "Of course, I'm doing them," I answered. "I'm not going to ruin the games of these excellent men!"

3

On the Way Back from Debrecen

Again we were in that dump of a car, cutting through the curtain of snow and fog in a semiconscious state of fatigue. After the performance we went to a student's apartment. Ginsberg answered questions until 2:00 in the morning. He talked about himself and the other beat poets. Then when asked to recite a poem, he recited Corso with joyful rapture.

From the student's home, we drove to the Golden Bull Hotel; but here a slight conflict arose. The porters didn't want to let in the 16-year-old girl whom Orlovsky had under his wing. The girl didn't have papers so we couldn't even take out a room for her. At this moment, however, a somewhat older girl offered her—at my suggestion—her sublet apartment. I talked with this girl in a night-club, then at her girl friend's apartment until morning. That is why I didn't sleep a wink; Orlovsky didn't sleep either, but for other reasons. Ginsberg and Taylor must have retired at

3:00, so those two had a certain advantage on the trip back. When I met Ginsberg before breakfast, he was reading a newspaper.

"Peter had a good time." I looked at his happy face and breathed a silent prayer to myself: God grant such a mate to everyone–and of course to our own mates, too.

From Debrecen, as I mentioned, we went to K's farm in Nagyrev, where we had lunch and an impromptu literary afternoon. From there we drove to Vac for the film. Ginsberg, for normal wages, agreed to play the first scene in the film of Gyorgy Szomjas with his Hoboes Blues Band. In the lead chamber of fatigue, I understood only that he would have to stand beside some broken-down car at night in this rotten weather. Ginsberg naturally thought that he would play this scene with Orlovsky. Gyorgy Szomjas, however, had only one person in mind.

"But we're always together," said Ginsberg, emphatically, and Orlovsky nodded.

Since I had slept only four hours from 3:00 am Tuesday to 7:00 pm Wednesday and had driven through mud, snow and foggy night for 700 kilometers or so, while constantly having to speak English, I felt that I would not be able to wait for them. I charged the filmmakers with the responsibility of getting them home. I invited them over after the shooting and started for Pest. One by one, I said goodby to each of them, and all three said, "Be very careful." "The road is icy, be careful." "Drive slowly and put on your seat-belt," said Orlovsky. While they were in the car, not once had they told me to be careful, whereas many people had warned them they were taking their lives in their hands by riding with me.

At about midnight, Ginsberg and Orlovsky really did turn up at my apartment. We sat, drinking and evaluating the events of the previous evening. Ginsberg could not understand why his entrance on stage had caused such consternation.

"It should have been explained to them that we had to set up the amplifiers."

"We would only have wasted time," I answered. Ginsberg said nothing.

"You don't agree?" I asked.

"No," confessed Ginsberg. "In my opinion, we must not begrudge time spent with any person. Then he took out Kerouac's book of poetry, *Mexico City Blues.* He leafed through the book, began reading the verse, then closing the book, continued to read.

"Jack," he said. "I owe him everything. He got me to write spontaneously and turn my attention inward. He was a Buddha, a wonderful man. He drank himself to death."

He put the book down. Orlovsky didn't say a word either, as if together they were watching an angel pass by.

Translated by Elizabeth Csicsery-Ronay