

Peter Peri (1898-1967) – An Artist of Our Time?

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This paper should be seen as the second in a series examining the lives of Hungarian-born artists forced to live in exile during the course of the twentieth century. While our first paper looked at the life and work of György Kepes, who initially left Hungary for Berlin, before settling in the United States (via England), this paper has chosen to focus on Peter Peri, who decided to stay in England having fled the Nazis at the same time as Kepes.¹ Kepes and Peri's artistic lives had already taken two very different paths by the time they left Berlin, and following a sojourn in which they both lived in Hampstead thanks to the kindness of Herbert Read, they were to embark on very different journeys: one which led to public recognition and renown, and the other to a life of relative obscurity, possibly total obscurity had Peter Peri not had admirers in the persons of Anthony Blunt,² and more importantly John Berger, whose first novel *A Painter of Our Time* is partly based on the life of this Hungarian emigré.

László Péri: Peter Peri³

John Berger's first novel *A Painter of Our Time*, published in 1958,⁴ is based around the diary entries of the fictional Hungarian emigré artist János Lavin,⁵ as read by his friend John, who has found the journal on the floor of the painter's

¹ Palmer, Matthew, "György Kepes and Modernism: Towards a Course and Successful Visual Centre," *Eger Journal of English Studies Vol. VI*, 67-82.

² Anthony Blunt (1907-1983), professor of Art History at the University of London, director of the Courtauld Institute, London (1947-74), and surveyor of the King's / Queen's pictures (1945-75), honorary fellow of Trinity College Cambridge and Soviet spy from some time in the 1930s to at least the early 1950s.

³ During the course of this paper the artist will be referred to as László Péri in the period up to his leaving Berlin in 1933, and Peter Peri from his arrival to England onwards, although Péri was only to adopt the name Peter Peri formally when he gained UK citizenship in 1939.

⁴ As Peter Fuller reminds us in *Seeing Through Berger* (London and Lexington: The Claridge Press, 1988), the book was soon withdrawn by its publishers, Secker & Warburg, who were also publishers of the CIA backed magazine *Encounter*, which contained a hostile attack on the book (4, footnote 4).

⁵ In Berger's novel János is written "Janos", without an accent.

abandoned London studio. The journal, which begins with the entry for 4th January 1952 and ends on 11th October 1956, is found towards the end of October that year, after which a Hungarian friend of John, “who wishes to remain anonymous”, makes a rough translation of the document from Hungarian into English. John then publishes an annotated and revised version of János’s diary under the title *A Painter of Our Time*. While it has been widely recognised that the character of John, who is an art lecturer, is based on John Berger himself, the original model or models for the character of János Lavin has been open to debate.⁶ While Berger’s list of acknowledgments includes the Hungarian emigré artist Peter Peri,⁷ he has subsequently made a point of saying that although the character resembles Peri closely, the novel is ‘in no sense a *portrait* of Peri’ (Fig. 1.).⁸ But to what extent does János Lavin resemble Peter Peri?

This paper appears at a time when Peter Peri is receiving some overdue public attention both in Hungary and England, courtesy of the 2008 shows “Nature and Technology: Moholy-Nagy Reassessed 1916-1923” (The Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest) and “Art for the People : Peter Peri 1899-1967 - An exhibition of sculpture, prints and drawings” (Sam Scorer Gallery, Lincoln).⁹ Rather than merely being an attempt to evaluate the extent to which the character of János Lavin was based on Peter Peri, this paper will seek to assess the changing fortunes of an artist, whose greatest achievements are often seen to have been crammed into four years between 1920 and 1924 while he was living in Berlin,¹⁰ and whose subsequent work has aroused very little interest among critics and art historians, with the notable exceptions of Anthony Blunt and John Berger.¹¹

⁶ In his afterword to the Hungarian edition of the novel – John Berger, *Korunk festője*, trans. László Lugosi (Budapest: Európa Könyvkiadó, 1983) – István Bart suggests Peri is Berger’s model.

⁷ Berger, John, *A Painter of Our Time* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958). The acknowledgements: “the contributions of the following to this book - contributions by way of example, criticism, encouragement and quite straightforward, practical services of help: Victor Anant, the late Frederick Antal, Anya Bostock, John Eskill, Peter de Francia, Renato Guttuso, Peter Peri, Wilson Plant, Friso and Vica Ten Holt, Garith Windsor, and my own parents”.

⁸ John Berger, “Impressions of Peter Peri,” in the *Peter Peri Memorial Exhibition Catalogue* (1968), an essay that also appears in John Berger, *The Look of Things* (1972).

⁹ The accompanying publications were: Botár Olivér, *Természet és Technika: Az újraértelmezett Moholy-Nagy 1916-1923* (Budapest: Vince Kiadó; Janus Pannonius Múzeum Pécs, 2007) and the pamphlet *Art for the People : Peter Peri 1899-1967 An exhibition of sculpture, prints and drawings*, including an essay by Sarah Taylor.

¹⁰ Passuth Krisztina, “Péri László konstruktivista művészete”, *Művészettörténeti Értesítő* 91/3-4 (Budapest 1991), 175.

¹¹ Apart from being ignored Peter Peri has also been a subject of derision. A typical example can be seen in David Pryce-Jones’s review of Miranda Carter’s “Anthony Blunt: His Lives” in the March 2002 edition of *New Criterion*: “There is something hilarious about Blunt’s adoption of Soviet realism, his inability to know what to think about Picasso and modernism, or his admiration of hack artists of the day, like the justly forgotten Peter Peri” (p. 62). When writing about contemporary art in the *New Statesman and Nation* and elsewhere, John Berger was aware that he was championing ‘famously unacceptable’ realists.

Any account of the life and work of Peter Peri, however, has to acknowledge that there were in fact two Peris: the László Péri, as he was then known, who left Hungary for Berlin shortly after the collapse of the Republic of Councils in 1919, and who then moved from Berlin to London in 1933; and the Peter Peri he became shortly after arriving in England.¹² This duality is due as much to historiographical circumstances as to the vicissitudes in his life. For while the English literature on Peri devotes very little space to his pre-London existence,¹³ Hungarian research says next to nothing about Péri's life after he left Berlin, and even when references are made they are done in a very disparaging way.¹⁴ This information gap, which our intention is to fill here, we shall discover, is also a device Berger uses in his novel to allow him to lay the clues and expound the riddles that lead to the novel's unresolved conclusion, in which he leaves the reader to decide, firstly whether János Lavin returns to Hungary (we last hear of him in Vienna), and then to resolve which side he fought or sympathised with during the Hungarian Uprising:

Even worse, we do not know what he did. Did he stand by and watch those terrible days in Budapest? Did he join with the revisionists of the Petőfi circle? Did he fight side by side with those workers' councils who resisted the Red Army? Did he oppose this resistance and was he lynched by a mob as a Rákosi agent? Is he now a supporter of the

¹² According to *Tate Gallery: Illustrated Catalogue of Acquisitions 1986-88* (London: Tate Gallery, 1996) László Péri was born László Weisz, something that also appears in Peri's Wikipedia entry and Gillian Whiteley's entry for Peter Peri in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, published in September 2004. It would appear, however, this is based on a misunderstanding, as it was László Moholy-Nagy, himself like Péri a Jew, who was born László Weisz.

¹³ Much of what has been written in Britain on Hungarian emigrés tends to be interested in the way people like Peter Peri have made a significant contribution to British Civilisation. In this respect Sárközi, Mátyás, *Hungaro-Brits: The Hungarian Contribution to British Civilization* (Ministry of National Cultural Heritage, 2000) is not only typical, but a valuable document. I am indebted to my aunt and uncle, Rosemary and Raymond Harris who received their copy when guests of Katalin Bogyay at a Hungarian Evening held at The Athenaeum on 28th February 2002. Their covering note gives one an idea as to how cultural interchange took place in mid-20th England. "We were given some publications (too heavy to send), one of which was a list of 'Hungaro Brits' – famous Britons who are actually Hungarians, having been chased out by Hitler or Stalin. It included Dennis Gabor, the husband of Lilly Goetz's close friend (Lilly was our maid in Brixton before the war). It should have included Marta Zalan (sic!), Eleanor's brilliant piano teacher, but I suppose she's not famous enough."

¹⁴ This is perhaps typified in Krisztina Passuth's article "Egyszerű geometrikus formák" *Népszabadság*, 1st November 1999: "On leaving Germany in 1933 he (Péri) settled in England, when he went about recreating his earlier lost works in cement. Primarily, however, he made small figures in a realistic-natural vein, whose artistic power never matched that of his earlier work" (p. 11). In saying this, however, one should mention that Helga László wrote her undergraduate thesis at the University of Budapest under the title "The Realistic Sculpture of Laszlo Peter Peri" in 1990.

Kádár government or does he bide his time? Each of these possibilities is reasonable.¹⁵

János Lavin: Peter Peri

Biographical details about János Lavin are spread thinly throughout the novel. The little John in fact knows, he tells us first in the opening section which leads up to the finding of the diary, and then with the annotations John adds to the diary entries that follow. The lack of concrete information confirms John's realisation when looking at the artist's abandoned studio that there is a lot he does not know about his friend. It is a conclusion Berger also comes to in relation to Peter Peri.¹⁶ What follows in the novel is, as John tells us, a search for what he did not know and what had not even realised about János Lavin.

There were several photographs of athletes in action – hurdlers, skiers, divers. There was a picture postcard of the Eiffel Tower. There was a photograph of himself with some other students at Budapest University in 1918. He had originally intended to be a lawyer. He did not seriously begin painting until his early twenties, when he was in Prague – having been forced to leave Hungary after the overthrow of the Soviet revolutionary government in 1919. There was another photograph of about a dozen people at a studio party in his own Berlin studio in the late twenties. In the background one could see some of his own paintings, which were then abstract.¹⁷

László Péri was born in Budapest in 1899 into a large proletarian Jewish family and became politicised at an early age. In adolescence he moved in the same cultural and political circles as László Moholy-Nagy, which was by about 1917 to centre on Lajos Kassák's journal *MA* (Today). He also lived in Paris for a short period in 1920, where he stayed in the house of a socialist baker before being forced to leave the country due to his political activities. While it is not known for sure whether Péri, like his friend László Moholy-Nagy, studied Law, Krisztina Passuth believes it was by no means unlikely that he did. Péri also went as part of a theatre company to Prague, which is where he heard about the fall of the Republic of Councils, before moving to Vienna and then on to Berlin.¹⁸

When reflecting on how they first met at the National Gallery in London, John mentions that although János had enjoyed quite a reputation in Berlin at the end of the twenties and had had a book published in England at the end of the

¹⁵ Berger (1958), 190.

¹⁶ Berger (1968), 3: "I asked him many questions. But now I have the feeling that I never asked him enough. Or at least that I never asked him the right questions."

¹⁷ Berger (1958), 11-12.

¹⁸ Passuth (1991), 175-77.

war, he had practically been forgotten by the 1950s.¹⁹ Passuth dates the heights of Péri's artistic powers a little earlier to the four years between 1920 and 1924, during which time he enjoyed the patronage and support of Herwarth Walden and his *Der Sturm* gallery and magazine.²⁰ It was a period when, following a joint exhibition at Der Sturm Gallery in February 1922 that Moholy-Nagy and Péri enjoyed critical acclaim as they each pursued their own constructivist agendas.²¹ On returning from the Soviet Union in 1922 Alfréd Kemény declared the artists to be the only two up-and-coming artists capable of producing work of a comparable level to the best he had seen in Russia.²² El Lissitzky came to a similar conclusion.²³

Péri's contributions to constructivism at this time were firstly the discovery of concrete as a potential sculptural medium,²⁴ colouring it if necessary, and secondly the appreciation of the hard contour as a visual device, as seen in his collages and lino prints,²⁵ which could be used to create a visual medium hovering somewhere between the relief and architecture.²⁶ Péri's great contribution at a time, in late 1922 and early 1923, when both Péri and Moholy-Nagy were happy to sign manifestos declaring the necessity for a true communist constructivism,²⁷ was therefore to challenge the surface of the wall and to open up new planes. Whereas Moholy-Nagy's *Glasarchitektur* achieved this using paint and canvas Péri used less conventional media. This he did to great effect at the *Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung* in May 1923 with his three-piece 7 x 17-metre composition, which while it may also have been executed in paint on canvas, had pretensions to be executed in concrete (Fig. 2.).²⁸

Perhaps his most memorable image from this period, and certainly the most reproduced of Péri's works is his plan for a Lenin Memorial (1924) (Fig. 3.). It however also marked the end of Péri's investigations into the non-objective. While Moholy-Nagy's immediate career would take him to the Bauhaus, Péri's star waned.

¹⁹ Berger (1958), 18-19.

²⁰ Passuth (1991), 175.

²¹ Passuth Krisztina, *Avantgarde Kapcsolatok Prágától Bukarestig 1907-1930* (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 1998), 225-34.

²² Moholy-Nagy's letter to the editorial board of *Kunstblatt*, Berlin, July 1924, published in Passuth Krisztina, *Moholy-Nagy* (Budapest: Corvina, 1982), 382.

²³ Passuth (1982), 361.

²⁴ Although some his concrete sculptures survive from the 1920s, most notably *Reclining Woman* (1920) and *Standing Woman* (1924), other Berlin designs were subsequently worked in concrete from photos and drawings soon after Péri's arrival in England. József Vadas's recent article "A beton mint hungarikum" (Concrete as Hungarian National Treasure), *Népszabadság* (June 12th, 2010) fails to make any mention of Péri as a pioneer in the medium, or that he invented a synthetic material for sculptors, which he patented under the name Pericrete.

²⁵ Peri *Linoleumschitte* 1922-23. Verlag der Sturm, Berlin 1923, with preface by Alfréd Kemény.

²⁶ Passuth (1998), 229.

²⁷ "Nyilatkozat", signed by Ernő Kállai, Alfréd Kemény, László Moholy-Nagy, László Péri, *Egység* 1923 márciusi szám, reproduced in Szabó 195-6.

²⁸ Szabó 118; Passuth (1982), 31; Passuth (1991), 185-7.

By the late 1920s Péri was living on state support in Germany having tried unsuccessfully to be an architect.²⁹ Péri's decision to abandon constructivist art appears to have been caused by his realisation that while constructivism had a future in architecture, realism was best suited for the visual arts. It was a realisation that coincided with the changes in cultural attitudes that were going on in the Soviet Union at this time.³⁰

I believed that the results and experiments of constructivism could best be used and developed in architecture. (...) My interest in people, the way they live and their relationships to each other was so strong that architecture did not satisfy me and since 1929, I have returned to representational art. The significance of my representational painting and sculpture is, that it follows constructivism, i.e. using all the knowledge I gained through abstract art.³¹

In 1928 Péri signed the manifesto and statutes of the German Association of Revolutionary Visual Artists (*Association Revolutionärer Bildener Künstler Deutschlands*), otherwise known as "Asso", which like other new and militant Communist art organisations called for a reinvigoration of the idea of "proletarian culture" and suitably positive images of working-class life and culture.³² It has been suggested that Péri himself went to the Soviet Union, although Passuth suggests this remained a dream.³³ Berger gives Lavin a concrete reason why he went to England rather than the Soviet Union:

²⁹ Passuth suggests his decision to work for the Berlin municipal architectural office in 1924 was motivated by a desire to put his productivist values into action. It proved a frustrating period and he left his job in 1928 (1991, 188).

³⁰ It was a move that had its origins in the emergence of Realist groups like the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia within the Soviet Union (AkhRR), whose Declaration was published in June-July 1922. As to what such a realist approach entailed, a circular to all branches of AkhRR in May 1924 tells us: "Only now, after two years of AkhRR, after the already evident collapse of the so-called leftist tendencies in art, is it becoming clear that the artist of today must be both a master of the brush and a revolutionary fighting for the better future of mankind. Let the tragic figure of Courbet serve as the best prototype and reminder of the aims and tasks that contemporary art is called on to resolve." quoted from AkhRR: "The Immediate Tasks of AkhRR", a circular to all branches of the AkhRR in May 1924. It followed the exhibition "Revolution, Life and Labour" in February 1924, republished in: Harrison, Charles and Wood, Paul (eds), *Art in Theory: 1990-1990, An Anthology of Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 387.

³¹ From the exhibition catalogue accompanying the exhibition "It's the People who Matter" at the Lloyd's Gallery Wimbledon, 1965.

³² Harrison & Wood (eds) 390-393. As they note Asso followed the example AkhRR in Russia.

³³ Passuth Krisztina: *Magyar művészek az európai avantgarde-ban: A kubizmustól a konstruktivizmusig 1919-1925* (Budapest: Corvina, 1974), 144-5; Lynda Morris & Robert Radford, *The Story of the Artists International Association 1933-1953* (Oxford: The Museum of Modern Art, 1983) say, Peri went to get to know the work of Malevich, Tatlin and Rodchenko, "and helped on the design of workers communes" (49). Passuth later rejected Katherine S.

The most critical decision of my life, though at the time it was casual enough, was when I decided to come west instead of going to Moscow. And the reason behind my decision now seems not only naïve but ironic. I wanted to go where I would still have to fight for Socialism. I did not want to enjoy the victory that others had fought for.³⁴

For Péri the decision to go west was made suddenly in 1933 after the Nazis had forced their way into his studio in Berlin.³⁵ It meant he had to leave his works in concrete behind.³⁶ On arriving in England he lived first in Ladbroke Grove and then 10 Willow Road, Hampstead,³⁷ before moving to a studio in Camden Town in 1938.³⁸ John Berger reflects on his early memories of Peter Peri in the following terms:

I knew about Peter Peri from 1947 onwards. At that time he lived in Hampstead and I used to pass his garden where he displayed his sculptures. I was an art student just out of the Army. The sculptures impressed me not so much because of their quality – at that time many other things interested me more than art – but because of their strangeness. They were foreign looking. I remember arguing with my friends about them. They said they were crude and course. I defended them because I sensed they were the work of somebody totally different from us.³⁹

As to János Lavin's publication of a book at the end of the war, it would appear that this was not true of Peter Peri, despite the fact that he continued to be vocal in his attitudes towards art and society. On his arrival in England he became a member of the recently founded English section of the Artists International

Dreier's opinion that Peri went to the Soviet Union to work on housing projects, and claims that Mary Peri was insistent that her husband did not go (1991, 189-190).

³⁴ Berger (1958), 41.

³⁵ Passuth (1991), 188.

³⁶ Passuth (1991), 188. While the vast majority was lost, Mary, his wife, was able to retrieve a few smaller pieces gradually over time.

³⁷ There Peri would have been among Herbert Read's "nest of gentle artists" who had sought sanctuary in Hampstead at the same time from mainland Europe. These included Walter Gropius, László Moholy-Nagy, Marcel Breuer, Erich Mendelsohn, Naum Gabo, Piet Mondrian, Ernő Goldfinger and György Kepes. The emigré Hungarians Breuer, Goldfinger, Kepes, and Moholy-Nagy were all represented at the "Hungarian Designers of Hampstead" exhibition at Burgh House, Hampstead (March 14th–16th May 2004) which formed part of the Magyar Magic series. Peri did not feature in this or in any of the events relating to the Hungarian year of culture in the United Kingdom.

³⁸ The exact address being 28b Camden Street, where Peri worked until 1966. Camden Town also gave its name to a group of painters including Walter Sickert (1860-1942), Harold Gilman (1876-1919) and Spencer Gore (1878-1914) whose work marks one of the high points in English realism.

³⁹ Berger (1968), 3.

(AI),⁴⁰ an association composed largely of commercial artists and designers whose declared intention was to mobilise “the international unity of artists against Imperialist War on the Soviet Union, Fascism and Colonial oppression” (Fig. 4.).⁴¹ By September and October 1934, Peri had already contributed “several forceful works in coloured concrete” to the AI exhibition *The Social Scene* held in a large shop at 64 Charlotte Street.⁴² László Moholy-Nagy also submitted work to the AIA exhibition *Artists against War and Fascism* opened by Aldous Huxley in November 1935, at a time when AIA was able to benefit from a mood of widespread consensus.⁴³

In his review in *The Spectator* (10th June) for Peri’s exhibition *London Life in Concrete*, held in an empty building at 36 Soho Square during June 1938,⁴⁴ Anthony Blunt made a point of stressing the credentials of concrete as both a modern and popular medium:

One of Peri’s great achievements is that he found a medium suitable for the kind of thing that he wants to express. He has no need for the more expensive media of bronze or marble.... Instead he has exploited concrete, a rough medium which has many advantages: it is cheap; and it can be used in several colours. Moreover, it is the most important modern medium for architecture; and if this kind of sculpture is to have its full effect it must be thought of as a part of architecture, as part of public activity.⁴⁵

Public activity formed the theme for the one-man show *Peri’s People* held at the AIA Gallery in November 1948, the title of which was adapted for use in the

⁴⁰ Later to be known as the Artists International Association (AIA).

⁴¹ Morris & Radford 11; Harrison, Charles, *English Art and Modernism* (London: Allen Lane, London, 1981), 251-2. The AIA intended to further these ends by: “1. The uniting of all artists in Britain sympathetic to these aims into working units ready to execute posters, illustrations, cartoons, book jackets, banners, tableaux, stage decorations, etc.; 2. The spreading of propaganda by means of exhibitions, the Press, lectures and meetings; 3. The maintaining of contact with similar groups already existing in 16 other countries.” At the time the statement was published, Peri was one of thirty-two recorded members.

⁴² Morris & Radford 14, 43; Harrison, 252. Henry Moore, Paul Nash, Edward Burra and Eric Gill also added their support, despite what Charles Harrison calls the “Leninist-cum-Stalinist” flavour of the accompanying manifesto: “We must say plainly that the AI supports the Marxist position that the character of all art is the outcome of the character of the mode of material production of the period. Today, when the capitalist system and the socialists are fighting for world survival, we feel that the place of the artist is at the side of the working classes. In this class struggle, we use our experience as an expression and as a weapon making our first steps towards a new socialist art”.

⁴³ Morris & Radford 29.

⁴⁴ The exhibition was sponsored by the Cement and Concrete Association to publicise the use of coloured cements. The works shown depicted daily life and leisure in London. As the anonymous preface to the catalogue stated, ‘Road workers, builders, charwomen and the street crowds of London are his models’.

⁴⁵ Morris & Radford 49.

Sam Scorer exhibition in 2008. In Berger's novel, however, the fact that Lavin is a painter means that works with such Peri-esque titles as *The Swimmer*, *The Games*, *The Ladder*, and *The Welder* are executed in oil on canvas. Here Berger drew not only on his own experiences as an artist,⁴⁶ but on the work of another of his named contributors, the Dutch artist Friso ten Holt.⁴⁷ While the trials and tribulations of the creative process, carried out in an isolated and solitary fashion, would have been common to both ten Holt and Peri,⁴⁸ the manipulation of paint and the challenges of realising a vision on canvas would have been the domain of the painter alone. Looking at his huge *The Games*, inspired by the runner Emil Zátopek, which it has taken him 11 months to complete, Lavin reflects:

In every shape on that canvas I could go to sleep happy. None of it is just paint now, just coloured shit. It is clean. Every colour has ceased to be something that can be rubbed off. Has become space and form. No one else will ever quite understand the satisfaction of that. The painted athletes will take the credit. Which is right. The content of the picture must always get the credit of the painter's technical struggle.⁴⁹

An aspect of Lavin's work that may also have been true of Peri, although one suspects it is more likely to have been a device used by Berger to make some cogent cultural and ideological points, is his relationship with László, a childhood friend whose life as a poet and then as a political activist accompanied Lavin's until László left Berlin for the Soviet Union, from whence he returned to Hungary to play his part in creating socialism after the war. When writing his diary entries, both before Laci's execution (recorded on July 7th 1952), János is forever comparing the courses on which their socialist beliefs have taken them, a course of action that is always laced with doubt and self-recrimination:

The difference between László and me was perhaps the constant difference between the revolutionary activist and the revolutionary artist. I always took victory for granted. He could never afford to. Maybe events have proved him right, but in the most unexpected way.

⁴⁶ While still a practising artist Berger contributed works to the AIA Summer exhibition in 1950. The Manchester Guardian correspondent wrote: "Berger's work faces outward towards the world more squarely, and his subjects – drunken fishermen, oxyacetylene welders, builders and acrobats – are reduced to a formal simplicity enclosed in thick black lines" (Morris and Radford 83).

⁴⁷ Friso ten Holt (1921-1997) Dutch realist artist.

⁴⁸ Expressed memorably by Berger (1958), 85: "Janos said to me once, "This working, it is always the same. At nine o'clock in the morning you are full of plans and ability and the truth. At four o'clock in the afternoon you are a failure."

⁴⁹ Berger (1958), 153.

He is dead because the victory was threatened, and I am left with only my prophetic vision.⁵⁰

An artist defeated by the difficulties?

János's diary is one that expresses the joys and turmoils of the painter who endeavours to work on their own terms, eking out a living from an ever-decreasing number of courses at the local art college and the occasional sale, forcing his wife Diana to take on a second evening job at the local library to make ends meet. For a man who had enjoyed fame, if not fortune, in Berlin, János wonders just under a year before the successful exhibition that precedes his disappearance whether he cuts a tragic figure. It is a suggestion János refutes: "Michel considers my life to be tragic. I can see this in the way he reassures me – in order perhaps to reassure himself. I suppose many others might agree with him. Yet it is not and has not been tragic. My work bears witness to that."⁵¹

Krisztina Passuth also portrays László Péri's English work in tragic fashion, but not in the same way as Michel, an old friend from Parisian days who sees János as being unrecognised, unbought and consequently almost destitute.⁵² For Passuth the issue is that he failed to find his own style and position in society.⁵³ However, in *A Painter of Our Time*, those artists who find their styles and enter the establishment, however, are roundly condemned for betraying the true aim of the modern artist: "The modern artist fights to contribute to human happiness, truth or justice. He works to improve the world".⁵⁴

In fact John Berger goes some way to explaining where Peri's priorities did and did not lie, in a piece he wrote for the *New Statesmen* shortly before *A Painter* was published.

In the past, one of the reasons why Peri has not had the success he deserves is that his work has unusually been seen...in the hedonistic atmosphere of London 'culture' where his cheerful lack of elegance has been mistaken for inept clumsiness. But here, his works modelled in concrete on brick walls beside a football field or a gymnasium, he comes into his own...he is not the least illustrative, and has the sculptural energy of an artist like Zadkine (Fig. 6).⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Berger (1958), 118.

⁵¹ Berger (1958), 160.

⁵² In her short essay for the Sam Scorer exhibition Sarah Taylor makes the point that Peri's material of choice, concrete, was "a rough, ordinary material," which would have "alienated London buyers".

⁵³ Passuth (1991), 188.

⁵⁴ Berger (1958), 144.

⁵⁵ John Berger, "Artists and Schools", in *New Statesman*, 27 July 1957, Vol. 54, No. 1375, 81. This quote appears on the website devoted to Gillian Whiteley's *Designing Britain 1945-75*,

It is a view that is corroborated in the novel when János argues the case for state-financed art when coming to blows with the art collector Sir Gerald Banks. This he does by making the point that late capitalism was incapable of commissioning artists in such an imaginative and daring way as the Medicis during the Renaissance, partly through a lack of a suitable subject matter:

‘I believe the artist works better if he has complete freedom. We have learnt that now’.

‘You think so? You do not think it is because you know you cannot inspire him? Because you know you do not share ideas with him. Except ideas about form. You do not commission him because you have no subjects. The artist is unemployable – that is why he is free. No one really knows what he should be used for. And so he makes exercises, he makes pure colours and pure shapes – the abstract art – until it has been decided what he can do’.⁵⁶

Despite his political convictions, in 1946 Peri was commissioned to make the sculpture *Displaced Persons* by the Ministry of Information.⁵⁷ Following a series of commissions for the London County Council in the late 1940s, Peri produced a sculptural group entitled *Sunbathers* for the 1951 Festival of Britain. This sculpture hung out from the north wall of station gate near Waterloo on the southern extent of the festival site (Fig. 5).

The most fruitful period in Peri’s English career was yet to come, particularly with the commissions he received from Stuart Mason, Director of Education for Leicestershire. These took the form of either low-relief wall murals, many of which were made in concrete, or more spectacular feats of three-dimensional sculpture leaping out of walls and windows.⁵⁸ In *Two Children Calling A Dog* at the Willowbrook Infants School in Scraftoft of c. 1956 (Fig. 6.)⁵⁹ and *Man’s Mastery of the Atom* (also known as *Atom Boy*) at Longslade Grammar School, Birstall, of 1960 (Fig. 7.),⁶⁰ one can see the extent to which Peri manages to make his (realist) figures part of the (constructivist)

Art for Social Spaces, Public Sculpture and Urban Generation in post-war Britain, accompanied by illustrations of some of Peri’s work for the Leicestershire Education Authority.

⁵⁶ Berger (1958), 37.

⁵⁷ One could perhaps congratulate the ministry in the same way as Peter Hennessy in his *Having it So Good: Britain in the Fifties* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2006), when he relates the case of Alan Brien, Campaign of Nuclear Disarmament (CND) marcher in 1958, who later joined the Air Ministry and became one of the Ministry of Defence’s experts on nuclear retaliation, namely, “One might think that only in Britain would such a mature approach be possible” (p. 529).

⁵⁸ Press release for the Sam Scorer exhibition, dated 20th February 2008.

⁵⁹ Terry Cavanagh & Alison Yarrington, *Public Sculpture of Leicestershire and Rutland* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 326-7; Helga László, *The Realistic Sculpture of László Peter Peri* (undergraduate thesis, ELTE Budapest, 1990), 87, 94.

⁶⁰ Cavanagh & Yarrington 11-12; László 87, 95.

architecture. The figure compositions leap out from the wall surfaces and even from windows, something, which Berger fails to say, form part of Peri's earlier interest in analysing the way hard profiles and silhouettes relate to their backgrounds.⁶¹ Despite this continuity with his work in the 1920s the very notion that Peri continued to be a modern artist was not countenanced by an art establishment that associated modernism with abstraction or with realism very different from his own.⁶²

Peri's greatest achievement, however, should perhaps not be seen in relation to the Modern Movement, but within the context of the project within which he himself was operating; namely, the creation of a socialist art. Looking at Peri's work for the Leicestershire Educational Authority in the company of Ernst Fischer's writings, it is clear Peri successfully avoids the dangers of politically committed art, and state sponsored art in what western communists once termed the "new democracies" of Eastern Europe:⁶³

A society moving towards Communism needs many books, plays, and musical works that are entertaining and easy to grasp, yet at the same time also serve to educate both emotionally and intellectually. But this need carries with it the danger of hackneyed over-simplification and crude propaganda disguised under a high moral tone. Stendhal wrote as a young man: Any moral intention, that is to say any self-interested intention of the artist's, kills the work of art.⁶⁴

At the same time Peri rarely commits the errors Richard Hoggart detects in the work of "middle-class Marxists", who when portraying the working class insist on "part-pitying and part-patronizing working-class people beyond any semblance of reality".⁶⁵

Peri's Position in English Art

Peter Peri's name does not appear in conventional accounts of 20th Century English Art. Charles Harrison's *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939*, which

⁶¹ Szabó 118. See footnote 30 and accompanying quotation.

⁶² There have been attempts to portray Peri as an artist who was a man ahead of his time. Helga László in catalogue entry for Peter Peri's *People Sitting on a Bench* (1948-52) for the Kieselbach Gallery auction held on 8th December 2000 suggests Peri's concrete relief presages Frank Stella's "shaped canvases" by forty years. We would like to suggest that Peri's decision to use concrete was partly inspired by its unproved durability that made his maquettes a liability for art collectors, a consideration that prompted Andy Warhol to deliberately print on paper that was likely to disintegrate quickly, raising the issue of in-built obsolescence.

⁶³ William Gallagher, *The Case for Communism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1949), 133-136.

⁶⁴ Ernst Fischer, *The Necessity of Art: A Marxist Approach* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 211. First published in 1959 under the title *Von der Notwendigkeit der Kunst* (Verlag der Kunst, Dresden).

⁶⁵ Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1958), 16.

goes into the history of the Artist International Association in some detail, fails to mention Peri's name. Accounts of British sculpture also leave him out.⁶⁶ Both politically and artistically Peter Peri has been considered by many beyond the pale. Indeed, one of the abiding themes in *A Painter* is the way János Lavin is considered to be old fashioned and out-of-touch by the art establishment for not painting in the modern (abstract) manner. It is a premise János challenges in his diary entry for December 7th 1952, when describing the ministry inspectors' visit to the art school he works at. His boss Hardwick tells the visitors: "Mr Lavin is our link with tradition," he explained. And I thought: yes, I who was painting abstract paintings when you were five years old."⁶⁷

The point being made here is that Hardwick, was not even aware of the artistic debates going on beyond Britain's shores, a debate Peri himself had already contributed to in England at his first London exhibition at Foyle's Gallery provocatively entitled "From Constructivism to Realism" in 1936.⁶⁸ This was in response to Naum Gabo, Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth, whose magazine *Circle*, first published a year later in 1937, was a landmark in England's contribution to constructivism.⁶⁹ *A Painter*, however, should be seen in relationship to what was on show at the Festival of Britain of 1951,⁷⁰ where the debate as to what constituted a 'socially progressive style' was still rumbling on.⁷¹

John Berger relates his memories of 1951 in his essay on Barbara Hepworth in *Permanent Red*, which illustrates his reservations at the time, reservations which resembled Peri's criticisms of constructivism in 1936, and earlier still in 1924:

⁶⁶ Sandy Nairne & Nicholas Serota, *British Sculpture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1981).

⁶⁷ Berger (1958), 77.

⁶⁸ Morris & Radford 49.

⁶⁹ "The Constructive Idea of Art" which follows was printed at the beginning of the first edition of *Circle*: "The Constructive idea sees and values Art only as a creative act. By a creative act it means every material or spiritual work which is destined to stimulate or perfect the substance of material or spiritual life. Thus the creative genius of Mankind obtains the most important and singular place. In the light of the Constructive idea the creative mind of man has the last and decisive word in the definite constructivism of the whole of our culture" (quoted in: Harrison 285). Contributors to the magazine included some of Peri's fellow Berlin and Hampstead residents Marcel Breuer, Walter Gropius and László Moholy-Nagy, who were soon to take their utopian theories to the United States.

⁷⁰ An event marking the "centenary of the Great Exhibition of 1851, in the Arts, Architecture, Science, Technology and Industrial Design: so that this country and the world could pause to review British contributions to world civilization in the arts of peace" (as announced by Herbert Morrison, Lord President of the Council, to the House of Commons on 5th December, 1947).

⁷¹ The Arts Council commissioned work from artists such as Robert Adams, Reg Butler, Lynn Chadwick, Frank Dobson, Jacob Epstein, Barbara Hepworth, Karin Jonzen, F E McWilliam, Bernard Meadows, Henry Moore, Uli Nimpf, Eduardo Paolozzi, and, as has already been mentioned, Peter Peri.

I remember that when Barbara Hepworth's two monumental figures called *Contrapuntal Forms* arrived at the South Bank for the Festival, the workmen who unloaded them spent a long time searching for an opening or a hinge because they believed that the real figures must be inside. I do not repeat this story now to encourage all those who automatically hate contemporary art for being contemporary: but because it seems to me to point to the basic emptiness of sculpture like Miss Hepworth's – there wasn't anything inside the contrapuntal forms. What are the causes of this emptiness: an emptiness which even all the good intentions, energy, sensibility, skill and single-mindedness that may lie behind such works cannot fill?⁷²

These were criticisms similar to those made by Millicent Rose in the *Daily Worker* on 10th November 1948 to an exhibition of sculpture in Battersea Park: "All those who felt empty at the sight of a Henry Moore, all those who wish to see a closer understanding between artist and public, should visit Peter Peri's new exhibition."⁷³

Post-Communist Peri

While Peter Peri's name does not appear in conventional accounts of Twentieth Century English Art his work is nevertheless arousing new interest. It is an interest perhaps easier to countenance now that the Cold War is over, and countries like Hungary are in the EU and not behind the Iron Curtain. With Socialist Realism no longer an issue, ideological positions no longer need to be taken when appreciating Peri's work. The lack of a political agenda, from artist and viewer alike, has removed any menace from what have always been celebrations of community life and human intimacy. Could it be that Peter Peri's depictions of the English working classes find a place in people's hearts alongside L S Lowry?⁷⁴

Peri's reputation, however, is more likely to be established as one of many who played their part in the English post-war school building programme, a project which Andrew Saint has described as: "[...] the fullest expression of the movement for a social architecture in Britain which gathered pace in the 1930s and found its outlet in the service of the post-war welfare state. No more ambitious, disciplined, self-conscious or far-reaching application of the concept of architecture as social service can be found in any western country"⁷⁵.

⁷² John Berger, *Permanent Red* (London & New York: Writers & Readers, 1960), 75.

⁷³ Morris & Radford 79.

⁷⁴ Peri's works for the Leicestershire Educational Authority were very popular with pupils and staff. They found their way onto school badges and even acquired nicknames.

⁷⁵ Andrew Saint, *Towards a Social Architecture, The Role of School Building in Post-War England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), ix.

In his fifties Peri could be said to have found his true vocation, albeit in a capitalist country led by socialists of Fabian rather than revolutionary convictions. Towards the end of his life Peri was able to reconcile his political beliefs with being a Quaker. As to whether Peri was an artist of our time, the English Peter Peri was undoubtedly an artist of my parents' time in post-war Welfare State Britain,⁷⁶ and also of my time, a child enjoying a progressive education and the social architecture in the Leicestershire and Hertfordshire Education Authorities.⁷⁷ A growing interest in Peri's work suggests that his work may even have a future.

Postscript: What if?

So what would have happened had János Lavin returned to Hungary in 1956? If one is to believe Géza Szöcs in his play *Liberté 1956* Lavin would have walked the streets of Budapest during the uprising uttering communist slogans, and promising to join János Kádár in building communism.⁷⁸ While Peri's stance on the ICA's competition for the statue to the Unknown Political Prisoner in May 1952,⁷⁹ suggests where his sympathies may have lain,⁸⁰ the cameo Szöcs gives Lavin is both infantile and out of character.

Lavin: This heroism... this noble people... the self-sacrifice, which insists on defending an unjust cause [...] in defiance of the tide of history [...]

Susan: Why, where is the tide of history taking us?

⁷⁶ My father taught history at City of Leicester Boys School from 1964 to 1968.

⁷⁷ My infant school in Evington, a suburb of Leicester did not have a Peter Peri striding up or down its walls, but Scraftoft was close by.

⁷⁸ Szöcs Géza, *Liberté 1956* (excerpt), in *Kortárs* 2004, 48. évf., 10. sz.

⁷⁹ The competition was proposed to the ICA (Institute of Contemporary Arts) in 1953 by Anthony Kloman, an ex-US cultural attaché in Stockholm, although there were rumours that the funds had in fact come from an American government agency. There were 3,500 entries, with the grand prize of £4,500, going to an abstract design by British sculptor, Reg Butler (Fig.8.). John Berger accused the winning entries of being uncommitted, abstract and sentimental, and of dealing with generalisations rather than the particular and local. Soon after Butler's prize-winning maquette was put on display at the Tate it was severely damaged by a twenty-eight year-old Hungarian refugee, Laszlo Szilvássy. According to a report in *The Times* (24 March 1953), Szilvássy handed a written statement to a Gallery attendant explaining his reasons for breaking the model: "Those unknown political prisoners have been and still are human beings. To reduce them - the memory of the dead and the suffering of the living - into scrap metal is just as much a crime as it was to reduce them into ashes or scrap. It is an absolute lack of humanism". See: Richard Calvocoressi, "Public Sculpture in the 1950s" in Nairne and Serota 137-8.

⁸⁰ Morris & Radford 91: "In the leading article by Peri in the May 1952 *AIA Newsletter* he states: There were always different interpretations about who can be called a 'political prisoner', or what we understand by 'human freedom', but these differences were never so apparent as today, because of the existence of new kinds of society – the USSR, China and the New Democracies of Eastern Europe.

Lavin: Capitalism is destined to die, the West is on its last legs [...]?

Berger tells us that Peri did in fact read *A Painter*, but he never found out what he thought of it, or its ending. Peri did not go back to Hungary, in fact he may well have found any suggestion that Lavin would return totally preposterous. As it was, Peri was about to enjoy the most fruitful period of his artistic career, certainly since his arrival from Germany. To his oeuvre he also added a series of etchings illustrating both *Gulliver's Travels* and Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the latter a project close to the Quaker beliefs he embraced towards the end of his life.

Illustrations



Figure 1. *Portrait of Peter Peri* (Leeds Museums and Galleries /Henry Moore Institute Archive/ Peter Peri Papers)



Figure 2. László Péri. *Sketch for a three-piece concrete composition*. 1923, (detail) paper, watercolour (Wulf Herzogenrath, Cologne)



Figure 3. László Péri. *Plan for the Lenin mausoleum* (whereabouts unknown)



Figure 4. Peter Peri. *Aid Spain*, 1937, coloured concrete



Figure 5. Peter Peri's. *Sunbathers* on display at the 1951 Festival of Britain (original now missing)



Figure 6. Peter Peri. *Two Children Calling a Dog*. Willowbrook Infants School, Scraftoft, Leicestershire, c. 1956



Figure 7. Peter Peri. *Man's Mastery of the Atom*. Longslade Grammar School, Birstall, Leicestershire, 1958



Figure 8. Reg Butler. *Monument to the Unknown Prisoner*. 1953. Photomontage showing the proposed site the Humboldt Höhe, Wedding, near the border with East Berlin.