Fields of Power

Episode 3: Fear and Loathing in Hungary

Ian: So as you can probably here from the noise in the background, we are by a road. Actually Péter and I have been joined by Noémi: Noémi, you might remember is the Hungarian professor based in Sweden who has asked us not to call her professor and we're here because we are on the look out for a shepherd called István. We're told he ´s gonna be with his flock somewhere by the road closed to the the village Valahol. As instructed, we've reached the general area and now Péter is calling for some more for precise directions.

But actually I've been lying to you. His name is not István, and the village is not Valahol, but we've decided not to use real names because of the very real threat of violent repercussions he might face for talking to us.

Okay, alright, so it seems Péter has some directions and so we'll get back in the car but, before we do, I should say this is episode 3 of Fields of Power: Fear and Loathing in Hungary.

Ian: he looks like a farmer!

Péter: yes…

Once we reach István, pull off the road and climb out the car, he starts talking straight away, his story spilling out of him before we get chance to ask him questions.

Péter: István is in his 70's and, as Ian said, he looks like a stereotypical Hungarian farmer, right down to the green trilby hat he wears. He has the hands of a man who

has worked his whole life on the land, and, as he tells us, farming runs deep in his bones: his family have been shepherds or farmers for generations.

In 2014 he applied for a renewal of the lease for the 200 hectares of land in which his sheep grazed. He lost. The individual who received the land instead of him, who we are also choosing not to name, has kept it empty since. He receives EU subsidies, but neither farms or grazes animals.

After losing access to his land István had nowhere to graze his sheep, and was forced to keep them indoors. At this point he started to complain. Things then got violent. His words are spoken by an actor.

István: I was in the forest helping the foresters mark trees and suddenly I heard a jeep and then the sound of sheep being hit. He drove into the sheep! I came out of the forest. I had nothing with me. He told me some bad words. I stood my ground asking him what he wanted.

He pushed me into the bushes, but then, as he bent down ready to jump on me, I held him back. He was a thirty-five years' old well-built young man, but I am a peasant. I gave him a few blows to the head and he surrendered.

He asked me to let him go, but I didn't let him. If he got free, then I'd be finished.

My phone was set up so that if I pressed number one, it would call my daughter. I managed to press it and call her.

"What's the matter?" She asked

I said, "I'm in the back of the woods."

She came with help and they caught the guy who tried to beat me up. We found out from him that the man who sent him was the same man who arranged the lease contracts of the pastures here.

It's been quiet ever since.

I heard back from the young guy who was sent to beat me up. His employer had fooled him: he believed he would just have to beat up an old man. But I didn't grow up eating muesli, I grew up on bacon!"

Ian: After this incident, a relative of István's, who has a different family name, managed to receive a lease to farm 30 hectares of land. That they did not share the same surname was important because István was told by a local politician that he would never receive land. István now uses this land of his relative's, which, though better than nothing, is more than five times less than the needs of his animals.

Péter: We wish that we could tell you that István's story was a standalone case. I mean, surely violence could not be a regular occurance?

After all, what would be the need for violence if all these transfers of land are all legal?

Scene: Ferenc being attacked

Péter: That was Ferenc Bolye, one of the co-founders of the Kishantos organic farm being attacked by the man who had been designated as the new landowner. If you remember from episode one, there was a legal dispute over land use still ongoing, but before it was resolved the crops were destroyed. On the day this happened, Ferenc and Éva were protesting on the land with the support of Greenpeace activists. In an interview with the local television news, Ferenc explained what happened. Since he spoke in Hungarian, his words are also spoken by an actor.

Ferenc: When he saw me , he turned the wheel and headed straight for me with his car. I didn't move an inch. I was almost ready to say goodbye to life and accept that this is it. And when he was just 2 metres away he swerved, and tried to hit me by opening the front door.

Ian: After the attack on Ferenc, the same man pushed around some of the Greenpeace protesters and ripped up their banners. Banners, which portrayed a paragraph sign - you know, the double S type thing with lines through it, the symbol used when citing sections of a legal code.

So, here we have an angry man who was meant to be waiting for the courts to decide on the ownership of the land, violently destroying symbols of the law – it´s beautiful, terrible symbolism.

Péter: That time, Ferenc escaped the incident without any physical harm. Then, on October 7th 2016 tragedy struck. It was an important day, for many reasons. The Budapest Regional Court had just ruled that some of the procedures around the government's land deals - including those surrounding Kishantos - were unconstitutional and clashed with the UN's anti-corruption convention. The Court forwarded the case to the Constitutional Court, raising the possibility and hopes of a legal remedy for the founders of Kishantos.

That same evening, Ferenc was at a choir practice in the nearby village. Ferenc had just finished reciting his favourite poem to the group.

Péter: Written by Hungary's most famous poet, Sándor Petőfi, during the freedom struggle against the Habsburgs, the poem is called 'To the nation', and is a passionate call for unity, patriotism, and action in the face of political oppression.

Ian: and the poem goes something like this:

Sound the alarm bells!

I have a rope in my hand too!

I tremble, but not from fear;

Pain and anger bubble up in my heart!

It's a pain because it's a shame for my country

I see another storm approaching

And rage, and rage, because we are idle, because

We can't lose sight of the dream.

Péter: As he finished the poem his heart stopped.

Ian: In some ways, it's a miracle that his business partner and friend Éva still fights with the vigour she does, as she too has had her fair share of threats over the years. Off-mic, she explained to us that when she began to actively fight against the corrupt land deals from 2011 onwards, alongside Professor Ángyán, at some point she was pulled aside by a couple of young guys from the FIDESZ circles- the ruling party- whose names we won't share here. They said: 'this is a friendly warning. If you don't stop sticking your nose into this stuff, you will be shot'.

Knowing what we know about the story of Kishantos, it's fair to say that, in fact, both things happened: Éva never stopped fighting. And FIDESZ managed to destroy her and Ferenc's life work.

Péter: Everyone we spoke to asserted that Ferenc's heart stopped as a result of the immense stress caused by events at Kishantos. Of course, there is no way to prove this, but this is far from the only case of farmers succumbing to health issues after the loss of livelihood and land. Here's István, the shepherd we met at the start of the episode, again:

István: There was a shepherd there, he died of a heart attack. Another man, Kovács, also died of a heart attack. Then, I know of a cattle farmer in the west of the county who also died. And another shepard who lost land outside of Valahol. They all died from this, the stress of it. I mean, this is what we grew up to be: to be farmers and herders.

Péter: In her investigation, Gabi the journalist from Radio Free Europe we spoke with in episode one, also came across such cases:

Gabi: And actually these people are so dedicated. Some of them are so dedicated that when they were denied a right, they actually died. And I remember another case, another shepherd who died since our report, and he wasn't old, so I think that would be really important. So people have an opportunity to have a decent living. If they want to work, they should be allowed to work

Péter: Then there is the case of András Váradi, aka 'the truth-telling shepherd'.

Scene: Váradi funeral

Ian: Those were the sounds from András Váradi's funeral, so you know where this story is going. Váradi was a shepherd in the settlement of Alcsútdoboz, which is the village next to one of Orbán's childhood homes.

Váradi had been a vocal opponent of Hungary's land distribution policies, not in the least, because, in 2011 he and his family lost their lands to none other than Mészáros himself - if you remember Mészáros the country's most well known oligarch, about whom we spoke in the last episode.

Péter: But unlike many farmers who lost their land, Váradi didn't stay silent, and fought the decision night and day, appearing on television, filing court cases. And to accompany his legal struggle, in 2014 he decided to take things into his own hands and run to become village mayor.

In Hungary, even the smallest settlements have elected mayors. And these mayors wield significant power on a local level

Ian: Unfortunately, he never got to become mayor, because the night before the elections, while putting up some posters outside the village, he was fatally struck by a black Mercedes. Witnesses stated that the road was poorly lit, and Váradi was wearing dark clothing, making him less visible to drivers. However, to this day there are questions about the thoroughness of the police investigation. Despite initial forensic reports indicating the possibility of foul play, authorities quickly closed the case, labelling it an accident. Since then, family members and supporters have repeatedly called on authorities to reopen the investigation and address the inconsistencies in the forensic and witness statements.

Péter: Family members and supporters argued that inconsistencies in the forensic and witness statements warranted further investigation and many suspect that his death could have been linked to his activism and willingness to speak against powerful elites.

We are not a true-crime podcast (at least not in the sense most people think of true crime podcasts), and cannot, of course, make any claims about what really happened on that dark night. But here's the thing: foul play or not, here is one more disgruntled farmer, a farmer who lost his land, who lost his livelihood, and who, in his fight against the unjustness of it all, lost his life.

Ian: Of course, we want to hear from the government - to have them respond to these stories and to ask them a lot of questions. So we reached out without much hope and received the following reply:

Köszönjük a türelmét, de hivatali elfoglaltság miatt sajnos nem tudunk nyilatkozót biztosítani.

Which basically means they are too busy. But we didn't really expect them to reply. Aside from those those "journalists" who tow the government line, journalists are rarely granted interviews, routinely barred from events. Some have even had their phones hacked.

Péter: Local newspapers, who are part of the so-called System of National Cooperation we spoke about in the previous episode, rarely publish anything critical of the government. Many rural folk get their news from these local papers. So it's both unsurprising and shocking at the same time that one of the biggest stories affecting their lives - the transfer of land - receives scant attention. The few media outlets that remain independent are poorly resourced. They are, for the most part, Budapest-based and their stories reflect this. Even when they do cover stories outside the capital, it's often through urban eyes. Finally, because it's hard to find printers willing to print anything critical of the government, a lot of the amazing investigative journalism that is done - the type the journalist Gabi Horn has been doing for decades - is published online. Older people in the countryside do not typically read news online.

Ian: The result is that local rural communities do not really have independent media that serves them. It´s thus the case that one of the biggest issues facing rural communities has not been written about in the place where most rural communities consume their news.

Péter: On top of this, there's also fear amongst journalists in rural areas. István told us that he was advised not to speak to us by a local reporter. I called this reporter to ask if we could speak with him on the podcast, but he declined citing concerns that his family, who were also farmers, would face issues receiving leases to farmland if he spoke publicly.

Ian: On the drive back from visiting the great plain - the puszta as it's called in Hungarian - the traditional heart of Hungarian farming -we stopped at a traditional Hungarian restaurant. It was Péter's choice. And I have to mention it, because the restaurant was adorned with paraphernalia celebrating - or maybe mourning - a Hungary of the past. Back when it was much bigger and encompassed a lot of modern day Romania and Slovakia, among other countries. The map of this capital B Big Hungary, took up most of one wall. The romantic, sad, yet angry nostalgia it evoked seemed fitting for our mood after speaking with István.

After we finished eating (Noémi a tasty looking pörkölt, or beef stew, -, me and Péter breaded fried vegetables, really enjoying being a vegetarian in the Hungarian), we took the opportunity to ask Noémi her reflections on the trip whilst she was waiting for her chocolate pancakes to arrive:

Noémi: The main thing that surprised me of what we have seen so far is the level of violence. I was not aware of the fact that it was so systematic. And that this politics of fear was so embedded in the way the regime works from the national to the very, very local level. So people are being, you know, intimidated through phone calls, through increased controls over their land. We have heard stories of shepherds being beaten up. People who are close to political leaders pay other people for beating up people, to intimidate them so that they stop questioning the system and they stop questioning the injustices. Everywhere we went and what we have seen, people have talked about these ways of being intimidated. Some in a concretely physical, violent way, others through controls. But what really surprises me is how ubiquitous violence is and how

much this process of making the authoritarian, the undemocratic state is embedded in this type of violence, in this type of silencing people and opinions and justice.

Péter: It might seem that, amidst all the violence and intimidation, that there might not be much space for finding something hopeful. But another way of looking at the stories of István, András, Ferenc, and 'Eva are as stories of resistance. We know of their stories not only because of the repression, but because of the ways they stood up to it.

Ian: We're not, suggesting some sort of naive hope here. Nor would we like to replicate the trope we hear a lot where, at the end of a depressing story, the narrator says something uplifting so that the listener goes away feeling a bit better. But we would like to take the possibility for hope seriously. So rather than give you some empty happy words, we need one final chapter to our story, one in which we think more deeply about land and democracy with those who are attempting to farm a different future .

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