

## Encountering the poet, Rafi Lajos

The sweetness of a memory can last a lifetime: As I recall July 7<sup>th</sup> 2000 marked the first day I set foot in the alpine village of Lazarea, Romania – or Szárhegy as the ethnic Hungarians of Romania affectionately call it, on an exploratory visit to the homeland region of my artist friend, András Markos. He wasted no time in introducing the rich cultural spectrum of this centuries-old community, for the most part, intertwined with its Franciscan monastery, its historic, renaissance Lázár Castle, and a large number of lively artists, musicians, and folklore dance ensembles.

For the duration of my stay and on many forthcoming trips to Lazarea I was to remain the honored guest of the Franciscans and its guardian, Pater Ervin. From the monastery's formidable setting on the outcrop of a steep hill, one could marvel at the breath-taking view of an open valley safeguarded at its back by an offshoot of the Carpathian Mountains.

Within the shielding walls of the same monastery nests the jewel of an ornate 16<sup>th</sup> century Baroque church, where holy mass is said daily – punctually at 6.30 am. Only a few months earlier, before my arrival on the scene, Pater Ervin had assisted in founding the Culture Trust “Kájoni” in homage to the 17<sup>th</sup> century Franciscan, János Kájoni – a renowned Romanian music composer, who had done so much to preserve the music tradition of the region. The monastery had thereon made it their ongoing obligation to support the fine arts, while revitalizing their own cultural heritage.

Traditional patterns of urban life have endured and still preside over Lazarea's pace of living. Untainted by the claws of industrialization, I awoke each dawn at the first rays of light, to the reverberating toll of resounding church bells, and the chanting timbres of worshipers, to overhear the distant trudging of horse and cart on far off roads: Such was my serendipity.

It was in the community of the monks that I also learned to appreciate pork fat, home-grown potatoes and homemade plum brandy as a routine diet staple, a tradition that I still pay tribute to now and then. Every morning I made my way on foot from my abode on the hill down to the BPM Gallery, also operated by Markos. The gallery structure had been developed before as a marketing measure to network various art movements and connections in the area, at a place in time when internet was locally making its debut. Later that year Markos did an exhibition of my own paintings in the gallery. At the adjoining pub we always ended our creative exchange with a strong Hungarian espresso and maybe a beer or two: At the exchange rate of the time, a Romanian 50,000 “Lei” note was equal to just 2 euros – a beer cost only 8.000 Lei or an affordable 25 cents a pint.

The “Székely” people of the region, so I quickly learned, were a large enclave of Hungarians practicing their age-old ethnic customs throughout the Romanian state of Harghita. Once suppressed by the communist dictatorship many were still in the process of casting off those political shackles. Father Ervin had also become involved, assisting parishioners of the community on their paperwork towards regaining family inheritances confiscated under communist rule.

Later on that week András Markos returned from Bucharest, back from another of his extensive marketing campaigns, and we went out for our traditional artistic brainstorming and refreshment at the favorite pub next-door – at whose crossroads diverse walks of the local population and foreign passerbyers were always intermingling.

On that particular afternoon I had the most unique encounter with the legendary poet, Rafi Lajos: “the best Hungarian poet alive”, as Markos boasted. From across the room Rafi noticed me the minute I walked in – probably catching my out-of-place dress or foreign behavior. At my friend’s hand-wave a lively chap in a tweed jacket, worn jeans, and heavy leather boots pushed forward through the thick crowd, excited and curious about my presence.

So sudden and with no foretelling he’d pivoted himself head-on in front of me. The gesture was disarming but was only meant to show a sign of open welcome. In a wink he’d placed both hands on the sides of my head, gently pulling it forward, all the while holding me steady in his sights.

In the straining of our drawn-out silence and the cadence of my lost breath two beaming smiles materialised foretelling the promise of an ever growing assurance. Though strangers removed by language and culture, in the muteness of those moments I knew our artistic minds had somehow touched. From then on I could sense his unabashed passion, which I envisioned as being a source of incessant creativity.

Our personal ritual of smiles and gapes were jubilantly carried out each time we met, yet some hopeful glance into his dark, shining eyes could hardly suppress the melancholy, or the sweet-bitter taste of unabating sorrow. At times the burden becomes so heavy, an artist might ask, why even bear it? Solitude has it’s bitter side but it’s also a vital impetus for creativity, as was Rafi’s fate. Perhaps in such moments he simply felt understood as a colleague – eye to eye, or just listened to – as many an artist years.

Taking part in a flow of communal events over following years brought me in repeated contact with Rafi. Looking back, I realize how all the more, his particular way of socially interacting and the creativity of drawing on its spark was likewise important to the inspiration of his writing. Today, perceptively inscribed verses of prose are what stand out to fathom his stance on life, all in all, to grasp the magnitude and beauty of what Rafi Lajos had to say.

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Rafi Lajos, 2003 in Lazarea (Foto: Bunsen)