

# GEORGE FALUDY

## *An Interview*

*Jacqueline d'Amboise*

J.A.: Mr. Faludy, after many years as an exiled poet, wandering from France to Morocco, from the U.S.A. to England, Italy, and Malta, you came to Canada in 1967 and have lived here ever since. How do you feel about that now? Was it a mistake?

G.F.: On the contrary, it was the happiest decision I ever made, though, to be precise, I didn't actually *decide* to move here. Friends in the Toronto Hungarian community lured me here with the promise of an academic position, which turned out to be non-existent. I was annoyed at first, then took heart and looked for work on my own.

J.A.: What did you find?

G.F.: (*Laughing*) Nothing. The Canadian universities I applied to in several cases didn't even answer my letters. Finally, in despair, I accepted a lectureship Columbia University had been offering me, and for three years commuted weekly by air between Toronto and New York in order to teach there and live here.

J.A.: That looks like a lot of loyalty towards a country that hadn't treated you particularly well. What was your reason?

G.F.: New York City, like much of the U.S.A., is a civilized environment for millionaires and their servants. Canada furnishes reasonably civilized conditions for, I would guess, at least four-fifths of its citizens. Toronto is not Athens under Pericles, but no place is nowadays. At the age of 77 I can leave my downtown Toronto apartment at midnight to post a letter without much risk of being mugged. In the world as it is in 1988 one could not reasonably ask for more. But there is more! What other country would take in a wandering poet at the age I was when I arrived, 57, and then ten years later give him an old-age pension, free medical care and even, from time to time, financial help such as Canada Council grants? In many ways Canada has been a sort of paradise for me, a gift I have tried to repay with my writings. \$308.00 is not, admittedly, a magnificent pension, but no other country, I think, would have given me as much.

J.A.: Are you telling me that you live in downtown Toronto on \$308.00 a month?

G.F.: (*Laughs again*) No. There is a sort of provincial supplement that doubles it, if you don't earn anything. Unfortunately, I was never able to find an academic — or indeed any other — position in this country, so I am not eligible for Canada Pension. And once you make a certain amount of money, as I usually do from my writings, you are not eligible the *following* year for the supplement. So if I did not publish anything or give any public lectures this year, I would, for a period of two years, have only the \$308.00 a month to live on. This is obviously impossible, but I won't complain about it as it keeps me working! If I live to be a hundred I suppose I'll still be caught in the same strange situation, and still not complaining about it. Writing has been my life, and, so far, it has kept me alive.

J.A.: What about other exiled writers and poets in Canada — I am referring especially to your colleagues from Eastern Europe — would you say their experience has been similar to yours?

G.F.: Not at all, really. Of the handful of serious East European writers who have found refuge here — and by “serious” I mean the comparatively small number whose work will have a lasting place in their native literature — most arrived at a much younger age than I did and have had little trouble building careers apart from their literary activities. But, apart from mild poverty, I feel that I have been luckier than most. I have published eight books since arriving in Toronto, some with editions in New York, London and, since the advent of Mr. Gorbachev, even in Budapest. Major Canadian writers, beginning long ago with John Robert Colombo, have volunteered to translate my poetry. Dennis Lee, for example, Robin Skelton, George Jonas, George Johnston, Stephen Vizinczey. Many others. Imagine that happening in, say, France! A Hungarian poet in that country will — and I know this from painful experience — either become a French poet or a French ditch-digger, or else he will simply starve to death. It is much easier for a foreigner to starve to death in France than it is in Canada, you know. The only really unfortunate case I know of among talented East Europeans in Canada is the young Russian novelist Sasha Sokolov. He was born in Ottawa when his father was at the Soviet Embassy there — as a KGB agent, I'm told. Several years ago he got out of the U.S.S.R. and took refuge in what was, in effect, his native land. He has written what I consider quite probably the most brilliant Russian novel since Bulgakov's *The White Guard*. It's called *A School for Fools*. You don't write a book like that while building a career, and I think Sokolov had a very difficult time living in Canada. The Canada Council turned him down when he asked for help. I don't think they had any idea of the talent of that young man. I don't know where he is now, or what he's doing. The Americans published both his novels — in Russian as well as English! — so perhaps he's there.

J.A.: I don't know of any major Russian writers who have come to Canada. Are there any?

G.F.: Not that I know of. There aren't many, anyway. The level of writing in the U.S.S.R., including [that of] the dissidents is, in general, pretty awful. When they get out they usually run straight to the U.S.A. The Americans think *Doctor Zhivago* is a great novel, and anybody who thinks that is bound to be thrilled when people like Aksenev, Solzhenitsyn, and Edward Limonov land on their doorstep. Every subliterate Soviet hack can strike pay-dirt in the U.S.A., and if Sokolov — who deserves better — has more luck there than he has in Canada, I wish him well.

J.A.: Do I detect a note of bitterness regarding Russian writers?

G.F.: Absolutely. But bitterness, not envy. Russian culture, as that splendid lady Nadezhda Mandelshtam once said, died of a bullet in the neck sometime in the 1930s, if not earlier. With very few exceptions they're living on the reputation of their grandfathers. I don't think there's been a really serious poet in the Soviet Union since Pasternak. And none born after the Revolution. Novelists are in equally short supply, which is what makes someone like Sokolov such a miracle. It makes me bitter that hardly anyone in this country or the States knows his name; that people queue up to buy wooden, utterly deadly stuff like Solzhenitsyn's *Lenin in Zurich*, but have never heard of the really talented novelists of Eastern Europe — none of them from the Soviet Union — such as the Rumanian exile Petru Dumitriu, or Poland's Jerzy Andrzejewski.

J.A.: Do you feel that your own work has been neglected?

G.F.: Far from it! My name is certainly not a household word in Saskatoon — or in Toronto for that matter — but, then, that's never been one of my ambitions. I'm printed as widely in English as most poets nowadays. I got a letter from a reader in a village in Tennessee not long ago, an Anglican lady priest, thanking me for my poems. And a letter from a sheep-rancher in New Zealand! You can't imagine how extraordinarily moving it is for an exiled poet to receive such letters coming from an audience quite different from the one he had in mind when he put pen to paper.

J.A.: Do you always write in Hungarian?

G.F.: Poetry, always. Prose, usually.

J.A.: You mentioned that you are being published in Hungary again. If this liberalization process continues, would you ever consider returning there to live?

G.F.: No.

J.A.: If I may ask, why not?

G.F.: I am grateful to Hungary for having given me birth, so to speak, for having given me a marvellous language, and for a few wonderful lifelong friends. No other grounds for gratitude come to mind on the spur of the moment.

J.A.: I understand that you have been asked to visit Budapest.

G.F.: Yes. Various magazines and periodicals there have been running articles about me lately, mostly apologetic about the "sad past" and so on. Also a feature-length film about me is being shown, and I have just signed two contracts with Hungarian publishers for editions of 50,000 copies each. All this means that a certain amount of money is stacking up in my name in the National Bank, and as the Hungarian forint cannot be exported I may go there for two weeks in September to visit old friends and spend the money — to buy clothes and things I can seldom afford in Toronto. It used to be a case of "Go West, young man" to get rich; with me it's a case of an old man going East. All in all, though, it's better to be broke in Toronto than rolling in forints in Budapest.

J.A.: You've said a lot of nice things about Canada, and the translator of your forthcoming book *Notes from the Rainforest* [Hounslow Press, October, 1988], Eric Johnson, tells me that apart from all else it's one long paean of praise for Canada. There must be something you don't like about your adopted country.

G.F.: Well, look. I am 77 years old. When I was growing up there was still such a thing as Western Civilization, something I love almost as much as life itself. In any form in which one could recognize it, it's largely gone now. Or rather is transmuted into the bizarre society one finds now everywhere from São Paulo to Singapore, with far too many people, a general subliteracy and, at the top, the hierarchy of technocrats, most of them — except for their technical specialties — as uneducated as the proles working for them at minimum wage, or less. When I was at the University of Berlin in the early thirties the prospects for the world looked pretty bleak, but not nearly as bleak as they've turned out to be. Like everywhere else, in Canada today there is pollution, the nuclear threat, social misery, a proletarianized educational system, and, for the most part, a pretty stagnant situation in the arts. But, except obviously for the permanent possibility of nuclear extinction, in almost every way life is still better here. In 1978, when the University of Toronto gave me an honorary doctorate, I said in the convocation address that of all the countries I have lived in — and I have held five different passports — this is the most marvellously decent society I have ever lived in. Not perfect, God knows, but *decent*. There is, you know, no Hungarian word that quite expresses what English-speakers mean when they use that word. That precise connotation, which is missing not only in Hungarian but in every other language I know, is in itself enough to tell you why I feel so grateful to be in a country where it is not only understood, but also applies.