

THE LIBERATED FEMALE: LIFE, WORK, AND SEX IN SOCIALIST HUNGARY. By *Ivan Volgyes* and *Nancy Volgyes*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1977. xiv, 240 pp. Illus. Tables.

As anyone who has lived in East European countries in recent decades knows, the life of the citizenry there is neither a bed of roses nor a burning in hell. The discomforts of poverty, the grime of urbanization, the egregious injustices, and the gray parochialism of the political regimes are balanced by the knowledge that, for much of the population, life *has* improved since the "revolution." The population knows at least the sweetness of living in one's own country and nurtures the hope bred of adversity which the materially more prosperous West no longer experiences. This study of women in Hungary by Ivan and Nancy Volgyes could have been a wonderful vehicle for reporting these social ambiguities had the authors chosen to work their material more carefully. Not only did they live in Communist Hungary and use the language more extensively than practically any other Western visitor, they also had an unparalleled opportunity to do sociological field work there. They have come away with the results of over three hundred interviews with members of all classes of the population, as well as with a firm knowledge of the published material on their subject.

Unfortunately, the authors have tried to appeal to the readers of *Ms.* and *Playboy* magazines as well as to scholars. The attempt has resulted not only in editorial short-cuts, such as the omission of all Hungarian diacritical marks and a colloquial writing style, but also in a cheapening of their work. Their hard-earned and indisputably valuable evidence regarding the position of women in Hungary today is held up against a simplistic "women's liberationist" abstraction. Anything associated with childbearing and housework is deprecated as "enslavement" (alternatively, "serfdom"). The entire past is deemed "incredibly lopsided," and deficiencies in the socialist present "elicit only horror and revulsion in all honest people whose moral indignation is not tempered by political expediency" (p. 20). Furthermore, the book abounds with sexual titillation: four-letter words (printed in Hungarian only), data on the frequency (and duration!) of intercourse, a peasant father's wedding-night advice to his son, and a romanticized version of an affair one of the authors had with a call girl.

The book begins with a chapter on history and semantics which generalizes from the fact that, in pre-twentieth-century Hungary, peasant women were treated as cattle (by modern American standards). This is followed by a group of five chapters on the introduction of women's right to work in Hungary after World War II and on the shape of the female labor force today. The subsequent eight chapters discuss how women are "kept down." The discussion deals with the education of girls to be sex objects and of boys to regard them as such, the ignorance of contraception, pressures fostering early marriage, the expense of marriage, wifely duties, and the recently instituted state encouragement of motherhood (implemented in order to counter the falling birth rate). The next three chapters treat the difficulties of being a mother in overcrowded Budapest, and, finally, there are chapters examining sex within marriage, divorce, prominent women, and elderly women. The concluding chapter argues that there is a difference between slogan and practice in the treatment of women in socialist Hungary. If the authors had only started out with this predictable discovery and then analyzed the process of change, their work would have been much more valuable to scholars.

The book contains a number of statistical tables, a great deal of footnotes, a useful bibliography, and a selection of illustrative cartoons from the periodical press, but no index. Despite its flaws, it will be of great interest to all students of contemporary Eastern Europe and of developing societies.

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