

László Rajk's Artistic Work & His Contribution to the Social and Political Changes in Hungary

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Andi Soós
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László Rajk (1949-2019) was an architect, stage designer and artist whose oeuvre is the imprint of a significant era of Hungarian history and art of the twentieth century.

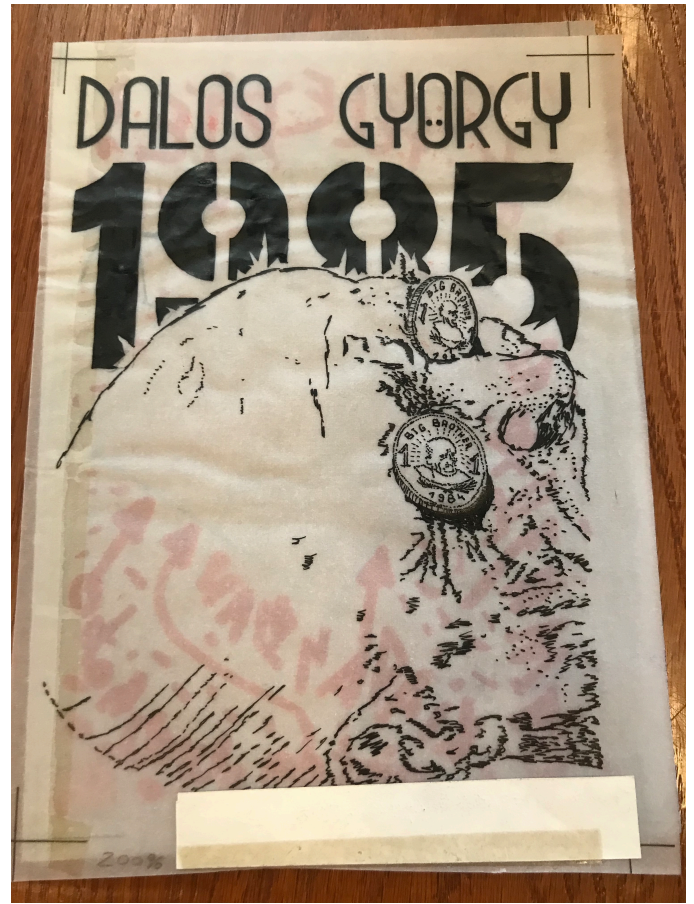
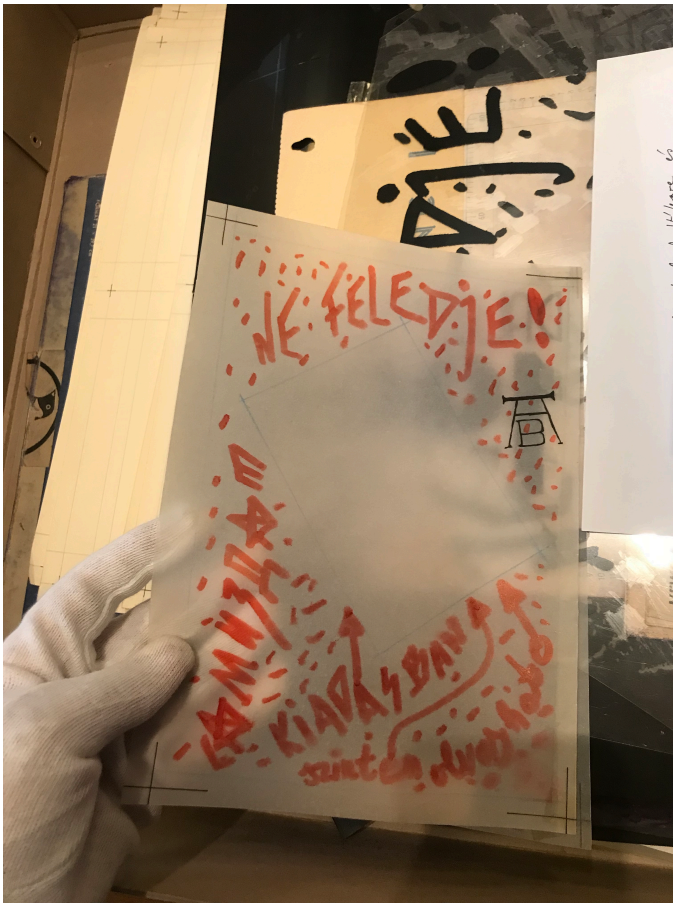
In his works he was dealing with the revolution in 1956, the Holocaust and the regime change. Rajk was part of the Hungarian Neo-Avantgarde and in 1975 he joined the Democratic Opposition, an underground political movement that later evolved into the parliamentary party called the Alliance of Free Democrats.

I contacted interviews and worked with him from 2017 until his death in 2019. Since then I am researching his work as a Phd student of the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design in Budapest. As an independent curator I am currently realizing a group show in Rajk's former studio in downtown Budapest featuring works by László Rajk, Little Warsaw artist duo and Andi Schmied.

The motivation for applying for the Visegrad Scholarship was that I wanted to add a historical perspective to my research and discover the various resources of the OSA Collection. By exploring documents, newspaper articles, radio programmes and Black Box recordings on the regime change in Hungary my aim was to understand the complex historical background of this era and reconstruct László Rajk's contribution to the political and social change in Hungary.

I was working with different types of documents such as:

- Footages of the Black Box archive
- Archive video footages of Hungarian television programmes reporting about the demonstrations and other events of the regime in Hungary
- Archive radio programmes
- Newspaper articles, interviews with László Rajk in the late 1980s-early 1990s
- Gábor Demszky's personal papers, including state security reports
- Samizdat periodicals of the AB Independt Publisher
- Original samizdat cover artworks designed by László Rajk
- Documents of the Hungarian political opposition
- A film titled *Version*, directed by Miklós Erdély, starring László Rajk



Samizdat cover design by László Rajk, 1985, photos by Andi Soós, courtesy of the Open Society Archives.

Initially I read archive newspaper articles found in the Free Radio Europe files about Rajk. Many of the interviews were about his relationship to the memory of his father, László Rajk Sr. who was a communist politician serving as Minister of Interior and Minister of Foreign Affairs. Rajk was one of the victims of Mátyás Rákosi's show trials in 1949.

Later I studied the state security reports about Gábor Demszky that often mentioned Rajk and the samizdat boutique operating in his apartment in Budapest. Rajk founded AB Publishing with Gábor Demszky and Jenő Nagy in 1981. AB was an independent publisher focusing on samizdat periodicals and works by authors that were banned in socialist Hungary.

Rajk and Demszky were surveilled by the state security so they built a network for printing and distributing samizdat periodicals. I had the chance to examine the archive materials, illustrations and tools of samizdat printing in the collection of OSA.



László Rajk participating a demonstration on the 23th of October, 1988. Film still, courtesy of the Open Society Archives.

Additionally I was actively working in the archive of László Rajk and prepared a group exhibition titled *A Town on the Edge* in Rajk's former studio. The exhibition is a collaborative project between the Little Warsaw artist duo, Andi Schmieid and me. My idea was to invite these three artists to react to certain aspects of Rajk's life and work and create new artworks for the show. Little Warsaw will reflect Rajk's early childhood in the orphanage where he was sent to when his father was executed and his mother was deported. Andi Schmieid will create a new installation inspired by Rajk's radical artistic style and visionary thinking about architecture.

Another outcome of my research project will be an essay published in the special edition of *Tiszatáj*, a Hungarian periodical on art, literature and culture. This essay will be an interpretation of the exhibition connecting various aspects of Rajk's oeuvre including the historical references in his works, his political views, his social network and architectural ideas.

With the support of the OSA staff and the Visegrad Foundation I had the opportunity to work with unique archive materials and incorporate new knowledge in my research. During the two months long fellowship I could delve into the historical, political and social aspects of Rajk's work and I could embed theoretical research into my curatorial practice.