

When the People Wise Up

by [Esther Cameron](#) (June 2025)



Washington Crossing the Delaware (Peter Saul, 1975)

Something about the atmosphere of these days is reminding me of 1976, the year Jimmy Carter got elected President.

My generation (yeah, I'm old) had thought they were going to change the world. At least, this was true of the people I hung out with in the 60's and early 70's. Our notions of method and strategy were a little fuzzy, but there were a lot of meetings, there were a lot of movements, there were a lot of experiments, there was a lot of rhetoric, and there was a lot of poetry, there was anger and excitement and hope, even if one did sense now and then, at midnight, that it would all come to nothing. Actually that had begun to become clear to me around 1971, and I had begun thinking about how methods could possibly be improved. But it looked to me as though some

structure would be needed, and “structure” (like “judgmental”) was a dirty word.

By 1976 it was becoming more and more generally felt that the fizz had begun to settle. And then Jimmy Carter’s candidacy was announced. It was a particularly slick campaign. I remember a picture of him with a sort of halo. His initials were certainly felt to be providential. I remember one woman who had impressed me as a highly effective person, telling me that it was going to be all right, Carter would fix everything. I remember the sinking feeling that gave me.

I’ve been remembering that because of the way some people seem to have been sure that Trump would fix everything. Particularly on *The American Thinker*, of which I’ve been a faithful reader for some years, and particularly in Israel, to which I fled during the Carter years. At this distance I can’t really judge how it is playing out in the US. Some reports I read are still enthusiastic, others seem to indicate that it is a mess. But from the Israeli perspective it is already a disaster. Our enemies have found Trump’s weakest point—greed—and have openly, publicly, lavishly, unashamedly bought him off. Israel still has a small window of time in which to defeat its mortal enemy (BTW: they’re also America’s mortal enemy), and Trump is determined to see that we don’t take it. Maybe Harris would have been worse; anyway, it isn’t good.

Amid the murk, two gleams of light. One is the victory of Yuval Raphael, a survivor of the Nova massacre in the Eurovision contest. As usual there were boos and threats from Hamas, and the jury put her way down the list, so officially she only got second place. But the audience gave her first.

There are still people out there.

The second gleam of light came from Hungary, where the people seem actually to have come to power.

I learned about this from two articles—Gadi Taub’s [“Why the Right is Drawn to Hungary”](#) (*Tablet Magazine*) and Bela Greskovits’ [“Rebuilding the Hungarian Right Through Civil Organization and Contention: The Civic Circles Movement”](#) (Central European University).

I will try to summarize some relevant points.

Taub writes that when the Soviet Union and its empire broke apart and Hungary regained its independence, the ex-communist-soon-to-become-globalist elite, entrenched in bureaucracy, media and academia (this should sound familiar), worked to hold onto power. They found an opponent in Victor Orban, who in 1989 called for democratic elections and the withdrawal of Soviet troops. After some years in opposition, he became Prime Minister in 1998 and attempted to implement a conservative and nationalist agenda. But the aforesaid power-holders restricted his ability to govern and gave him a bad press. As Orban later put it, the conservatives/nationalists were “in government but not in power.” As a result, Orban’s coalition was defeated in the 2002 elections.

At this point, according to Greskovits, Orban addressed his followers:

I ask you in the coming three months to form small groups of people, troupes of friends, civic circles. What we need is not formal organisations, but to get together, join our forces and be on the alert ... Our force is in our numbers, but it will become real power only if we get organised. Our force becomes real only if we can create and organise the public sphere of civic Hungary ... We need to know about each other to move together when the time comes.

The “civic circles,” it seems, were not occupied solely with

political issues. According to Greskovits, quoting one of their thinkers, they were also concerned with “the transforming of everyday life,” a seizing of “time, space, and soul” in the struggle for freedom. For many, this meant a reaffirmation of religious and moral values. I imagine that it would also entail learning to understand and resist media manipulation. The circles did not register formally as organizations, but their members were involved in a variety of organizations and movements. At one time the leaders of the movement estimated that there were 11,000 civic circles with 163,000 members.

Greskovits tellingly remarks that Orban’s call for the new movement *“energised his followers because it promised to help avoid the two dangers political losers usually face: apathy and radicalization.”* By “radicalization” Greskovits means “the ongoing campaign of street protests, petitions and lawsuits for recounting the votes” –measures which *attack abuses of power, but build nothing to replace abusive power structures.*

In the 2010 elections Orban’s party returned to power.

Picture me shaking these two articles in everybody’s face and yelling excitedly, “See, it works!”

“It” is something I have been trying to get people to consider since around 1975, partly inspired by the vision of the late Don Shalow, in whose commune I lived for a few months in 1970. The commune was supposed to be the first node in something he called the Lund Association, a network of groups, each of which would run a small business. The Lund Association never did materialize and the original commune broke up; but subsequently it occurred to me that a network of small groups, without the complication of the small businesses, might have possibilities. Possibly Shalow and I were both influenced by the plan Jethro suggests to Moses in Exodus 18:

You shall also seek out, from among all the people, capable individuals who fear God—trustworthy ones who spurn ill-gotten gain. Set these over them as chiefs of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens...

True, Moses is not among us (though Don's middle name was Moshe), but the pyramid could also be built from the bottom up, with each group of ten choosing its leader, who would then meet with ten others similarly chosen, and so on, till at the top perhaps, who knows, Moses would then reappear...

My idea was that the groups would not act or take stands *qua* groups. They would be meeting places for people to talk about what needed doing and what each one might do, to "network" and offer support. In 1975 I summarized my hopes for such an association in poem I have been showing around ever since:

An Invitation

*We gather here to see
faces from which we need not hide our face,
to hear the sound of honest speech, to share
what dreams have etched upon the sleeping brain,
what the still voice has said, when heavy hours
plunged us to regions of the mind and life
not mentioned in the marketplace: to find
and match the threads of common destinies,
designs grimed over by our thoughtless life –
A sanctuary for the common mind
we seek. Not to compete, but to compare
what we have seen and learned, and to look back
from here upon that world where tangled minds
create the problems they attempt to solve*

*by doubting one another, doubting love,
the wise imagination, and the word.
For, looking back from here upon that world,
perhaps ways will appear to us, which when
we only struggled in it, did not take
counsel of kindred minds, lay undiscovered;
perhaps, reflecting on the Babeled speech
of various disciplines that make careers,
we shall find out some speech by which to address
each sector of the world's fragmented truth
and bring news of the whole to every part.
We say the mind, once whole, can mend the world.
To mend the mind, that is the task we set.
How many years? How many lives? We do not know;
but each shall bring a thread.*

I keep trying, though hands-on organization isn't my forte.

One can think of reasons why the network-of-small-groups idea appears to have worked in Hungary. Hungary has a population that is relatively uniform in its ethnic origins and traditions, that is native-born, that underwent together the years of Soviet oppression and the gallant though unsuccessful revolution of 1956. These factors may have helped the Hungarians to cohere internally and resist globalist influences. Moreover, the Hungarians had a genuine leader in Victor Orban, who as early as 1989 had stood forth for genuine democracy and had earned the trust of a large proportion of the people. Thus his call for the formation of "civic circles" received a wide response.

Whereas in the US or in Israel ... Both countries have populations swept together from the four corners of the earth. True, we Jews in Israel share a common ancestral tradition and

a common situation; but in our interpretation (or rejection) of that tradition, and our reaction to that situation, we are divided at least three ways. Partly as a result of this, we have no leader who is widely trusted. In the US there is the history of the War of Independence and the Civil War, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the Gettysburg Address, the Star-Spangled Banner and America the Beautiful, "Give me your tired, your poor" –but all that has been debunked and derided over the last few decades. And again, there is no genuine leader, whose commitment to the people would be more than a projection of his own vanity that can be just as easily satisfied by a shiny new airplane. So how could anything get started?

Also, I need to acknowledge Greskovits' observation that even in Hungary, the influence of the "civic circles" peaked in 2006. Greskovits attributes this to class differences. The membership of the "civic circles" was mainly educated, urban and middle-class. Few circles were formed in poor and outlying areas. Greskovits states that after 2006 Orbán's party felt the need to appeal to the poorer classes and made a turn in the direction of the welfare state.

It may be a digression, but Greskovits' remarks reminded me of something that has been bothering me all along, namely the dual meaning of the term "conservative." People often use it to mean both "preservation of values and traditions" and "preservation of the privileges of the wealthy and powerful," without noticing that these two goals are not always compatible. Indeed, neither the Jewish nor the Christian tradition looks favorably on those who grind the faces of the poor. The growing disparity between rich and poor, as a result of automation and corporate hegemony, must somehow be addressed. Maybe if the "civic circles" had considered this, or had reached out more to the poorer areas, they would have remained more relevant.

But anyway, I still say: if the civic circles played a part,

even a crucial part, in the resurgence of Hungarian democracy, then at least they were not just a wild idea. In Hungary, for some years, and perhaps to some extent still, a large number of people were engaged in coordinated efforts, united not only by opposition to the “woke agenda” but by *a spirit of building*.

And that spirit of building appears still to be active. Taub mentions the Center for Fundamental Rights, a Hungarian think tank that is striving to create an international conservative movement. They hold an annual international congress. Taub quotes its general director, Miklos Szantho, as saying:

Many thought that in contrast to progressive globalists and liberals, who share a clearly global vision, conservatives cannot unite, since they believe in preserving the particular heritage and tradition of the culture to which they belong. Our conservative views are therefore said to be what divides us. But this is not true, since conservatives share an opposition to a common globalist foe in the guise of the woke agenda. There is therefore much that they now share, and they can unite in mutual support in these cultural wars.

There are still people out there. Maybe they will yet wise up, get together, and find their true leaders. There is a lot that can still be done.

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Esther Cameron is a dual citizen of Israel and the US, now living in Jerusalem. She is the founding editor of *The Deronda*

Review. Her poems and essays have appeared here and there; she has published her *Collected Works* on Amazon and has had one book published by an academic press—*Western Art and Jewish Presence in the Work of Paul Celan* (Lexington Books, 2014).

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