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An Artist at Home

Philip de László in Budapest and London

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Fülöp László, or Philip de László as he was later known, was an immensely successful and prolific society portrait painter. Being in demand on an international circuit, much of his career was spent moving restlessly between the capitals of Europe and North America. In 1869 he had been born into relatively humble circumstances in Budapest, where he remained based until 1903. The second half of his career, however, was centred on London where he died a British citizen in 1937. This article discusses the series of custom-built studio houses which he commissioned, leased or redesigned in both capitals, and which provided a vital element of stability and coherence in both his personal and professional life. The construction of the first of these in Budapest marked his marriage to a British debutante in 1900, and the onset of the most critically and financially successful phase of his career. The new house visibly demonstrated that he had 'arrived'. But having to juggle commissions from an increasingly eminent and aristocratic clientele throughout Europe, however, meant that within a few years the whole family was on the move. After a short spell in Vienna the remaining thirty years of his life were spent in London. There as in Hungary he hankered after 'a united life' in the form of a home which would express 'music, painting, personal taste'.[1] After various temporary solutions he appears to have achieved this desire in the last house he occupied till his death in Hampstead, one of London's artistic enclaves.

There was more to these houses than the expression of status and the combined provision of comfortable studio and domestic accommodation. The 'artist's house' both in Britain and Hungary had become viewed as a work of art in its own right, a monument to its owner's taste and creativity. On a professional level it was therefore an important vehicle for the projection of a public persona, and there was an expectation that its architectural and interior character would be consistent with its owner's artistic style and painterly sensibility. In de László's case, relatively conservative architectural and design tastes paralleled his lack of interest in artistic innovation. Throughout a career which spanned the emergence of Modernist art and abstraction, he adhered to a view of painting as an essentially representational and traditional art form.

1 Letter to his wife in 1914, quoted in O. Rutter, *Portrait of a Painter; the authorised life of Philip de László* (London, 1939), 282.

On another level, as part of de László's business concern, these houses provided a vital location for socialising geared around the display and sale of his paintings. In addition to operating as a living and working environment, an artist's house doubled up as discrete commercial premises. Study of de László's homes therefore provides a perspective on the comparative cultural and commercial formations of artistic life in Budapest and London.

The custom-built studio house was a distinct building type which reached its climax, and indeed entered a decline, in the period spanned by de László's homes. In this, it parallels the fortunes of his chosen art form, portraiture, which in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries enjoyed a period of exceptional prestige only to dip markedly after the first World War. Even more than a landscape or history painter, the portraitist needed to work to commission and was locked into a close relationship with his sitters. Invariably such relationships were developed in the context of the studio-house. Lessening the psychological distance from his subjects depended on a sense of social equivalence and de László has been described as painting personalities in 'the drawing room not on the stage.' [2] He stressed how important it was for a portrait painter to 'provide the sitter with the surroundings and atmosphere which are suitable to his personality and consistent with his state of life.' [3] During sittings he made a habit of chatting constantly with his models to put them at their social ease, and many of them became family friends in the process.

To achieve this sense of intimacy meant that his domestic interiors had to reflect not only his personal tastes but those of the people he painted. Aristocratic and socially eminent clients such as de László attracted in Budapest and London were not going to be lured to a dingy little attic studio over some shop or warehouse. For them part of the attraction was that they could relate to the artist as a social and intellectual equal, and through him become involved in the lively, stylish scene of areas like that around the Park Club in Pest, or around Kensington and St John's Wood in London. The distinctively national character of the furnishings in his Budapest studio-house related directly to his interest at the time in painting Hungarian subjects and to the predominantly central European profile of his client base. As the latter became more international and aristocratic, so the style of his London homes drew more on eighteenth century British and French sources.

To channel so much money and creative energy into house-building was not unusual for artists in de László's day.[4] In this preoccupation, as in so many others, he was shadowing the example set by an earlier generation of established artists in the major art centres of Europe. In London the paradigm was Frederic, Lord Leighton

2. Clifford, *The Paintings of P. A. de László* (London, 1969), 35.
3. Lecture delivered to the Royal Society of Arts, 1936.
4. For an excellent discussion of the whole phenomenon see G. Walkley, *Artists' Houses in London 1764–1914* (London, 1994).

(1830–1896) who had embarked on the building of his own glamorous studio house in Holland Park Road on the strength of being elected as an Associate of the Royal Academy in 1864. This developing interest among top artists and architects was a distinctive phenomenon which contributed to Britain's worldwide reputation for 'Artistic Homes' in the 1870s and 1880s. As noted in a folio volume devoted to artists' houses in 1883:

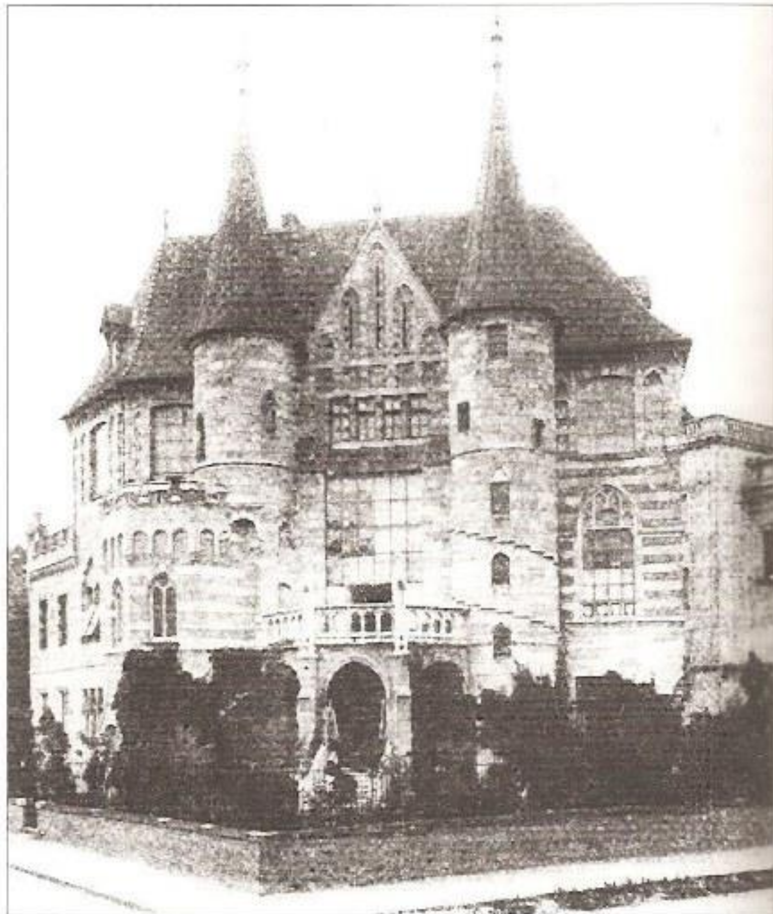
> Not to Architects alone, but to Painters, and to Sculptors, remained the task of embodying in practical form the teachings and influences of those who had charmed by their writings; and the Public looked, with reason, to Artists to show them how best to profit by the lessons learned from the first workers in our modern Art-Revival. Those Artists who have been enabled to build houses for their own occupation have had the opportunity of practically embodying special ideas of what 'Art at Home' really means, as they have introduced, with more or less success, their own individualities into their dwellings. [5]

The Aesthetic Movement had helped to focus attention on the home as expressive of both individual tastes and artistic discrimination, a kind of 'outer garment of the soul'. Being more 'aesthetically aware' than the majority, artists were seen as having a role to play in the development of public taste. Although it now rings with patrician arrogance, Leighton was in fact expressing a commonly held view when he suggested that great artists like himself, through their 'manners and method of existence...might furnish models to mankind in general, and elevate the tone and taste of nations.' [6] Without the pressure of the commercial imperative driving speculative builders, architects and the now affluent artists could work together to create houses combining modern convenience and comfort with beauty and 'exquisite' poetic feeling. One such house which entranced the young de László while a student in Munich in 1891, was that of the celebrated German artist, Franz von Lenbach (1836–1904). Once a week Lenbach's house and studio were opened to the public and according to de László were 'the delight of every young artist as well as of foreign visitors'; the atmosphere was 'inspiring'.[7]

High profile coverage was accorded to artists' houses in fashionable magazines and the professional press. De László's Budapest home in Pálma utca, for example, was reviewed in the 28. 1901 issue of the weekly magazine *Vasárnapi Újság* ('Sunday News').[8] Given the competitive nature of the art world, this type of positive publicity and its implicit confirmation of professional status was arguably as important in constructing a critical reputation as any reviews of the actual paintings. Building a studio house had become a major public relations exercise, and public expectations

5. M. B. Adams, *Artists' Homes* (London, 1883), Preface.
6. Leighton's autobiography, quoted in L. Campbell, 'The design of Leighton House: The artist's Palace of Art', in *Lord Leighton 1830–1896 and Leighton House* (London, 1996).
7. Rutter, op. cit., 83.
8. B. Lázár, 'László Fülöp', *Vasárnapi Újság*, vol. XLIII, no 28 (14 July 1901), 445–6.

Exterior of Philip and Lucy de László's first studio house on the corner of Pálma utca in Budapest, constructed 1900–03



had been raised of how a successful artist should live.

At the same time the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie in all great european centres were fascinated by the notion of the 'creative genius' and what inspired them. In this respect the cult of the artist as a personality converged with a growing interest in the domestic house as an artwork. There had already been a comparable focus on literary figures and their homes in Britain, most notably Sir Walter Scott whose house in the Scottish Borders, Abbotsford (built 1817–23), had already become a tourist-trap in the novelist's own lifetime. In Hungary similar veneration was later accorded to the Budapest abode of the composer, Ferenc Liszt (1811–1886), or the Jókai house in Balatonfüred. An artist's house could be viewed as a key to the understanding of his (and very occasionally her) paintings. 'In many of the leading studios one finds the mind of the master curiously apparent, for as surely as a painter's work is but the reflex of himself, with equal certainty his artistic tastes and sympathies are to be discovered in the abode he has chosen.'[9] Visiting, or reading about such houses gave a new dimension to the art compared to viewing it in the context of a gallery. There was a desire to

9 *The Art Journal*, vol. III, (1883), 72.

connect already familar images with the source of their inspiration, to almost relive their conception in the studio, while also previewing their creator's latest offering. Domestic spaces impressed all the senses and worked on the imagination, giving the experience a voyeuristic intensity.

To be an artist was to enter a risky, unstable profession, often at the mercy of a fickle public, although the rewards for those at the top were evidently colossal, and their lifestyle tantalisingly glamorous. De László's natural talent for painting was evident from an early age, but it was sheer graft, stamina and ambition that propelled him to the top of his chosen profession. Having started out as a scene and sign painter in his teens, he had patiently consolidated his career and social standing on a number of different fronts to achieve this transformation. Investment in house-building and decoration was an important strategy in the whole process. In this respect his series of house moves in Budapest and London paralleled the dogged development of his painterly skills, and shrewd exploitation of the market.

In the late 1890s de László had worked from a studio in Bálvány utca; 'It was not a good one, but I liked it because I was more alone and independent of a tiresome landlord.' [10] To this address he drew clients like the Counts Andor Festetics and András Bethlen whose portraits were commissioned by the Ministry of Culture, and worked there on his first large historical picture of the legendary Hungarian character, 'Zách Felicián' which won international critical acclaim at the Budapest Millennial Exhibition in 1896. The costumes and furniture for the painting were made specially, and the

Interior of the Pálma utca studio, 1903

10 Rutter, op. cit., 151.

furniture, like other studio props, were subsequently deployed in his Budapest and London homes (more prominently in the former). 'I should have liked to have done more of that type of picture', he commented wistfully in retrospect, but such art was too time-consuming, and a sale at the end was by no means assured. Being without independent means, the 400–500 florins he could count on earning for a commissioned portrait at that time was not to be ignored, particularly as he was already courting a wealthy debutante, Lucy Guinness, whom he had met in Munich in 1893.[11] His eventual marriage to her seven years later, despite initial opposition from her family, ensured his social and financial position in the upper echelons of society, but by all accounts he was always dogged by a sense of insecurity. By way of compensation he appears to have pushed repeatedly his already weak constitution to a state of nervous exhaustion, turning out some 2,700 portraits in the course of a prolific career in order to maintain an appropriate household and lifestyle.

On the brink of marriage in 1900, and with an established professional reputation, de László was poised to begin dabbling in property development. He needed to make a strong architectural statement which would reflect his enhanced social status, expanding household and eminent clientele. It was a tricky business judging exactly when and where to move, as an artist's house sent out such complex and significant signals, both to the art world and to prospective patrons. The example of established Academicians in the previous generation had taught de László that the right move could enhance a reputation. On the other hand, there were plenty of casualties—artists who perhaps inadvertantly moved into, or stayed too long in areas classified as a social desert. Others crippled themselves financially, gambling with mortgages on grandiose homes and an associated lifestyle which ultimately failed to improve their earning potential, or were perceived as inconsistent with their reputation at the time. De László shied away from the more established central villa district to either side of Andrássy út, opting instead for a site on the corner of Pálma utca, facing the fashionable Park Club. Development of the nearby Városliget Park for the Millennial Exhibition in 1896 had created a spurt of interest in this area. De László's chosen plot was large enough also to accommodate a small house for his mother in the garden. Although there was not the same number or concentration of studio houses in Budapest as in London, de László was not the only artist to move into this area. György Zala, the sculptor of the Millennial Monument on Heroes' Square had an artist house in the near-by Stefánia Street, as did Miklós Ligeti, another fashionable sculptor of the turn of the century period.

Stylistically de László was able to strike the necessary note of substance and extravagance. The imposing design, with two turrets built out in front 'in the manner of sixteenth century powder closets',[12] was more reminiscent of the romantic tower house William Burges had built for himself in London's Melbury Road (1878–81), than of the other new resplendent villas in the vicinity. On the front elevation the glazed expanse of the two spacious studios on the principal floor immediately indicated to passers-by that this was the home of an artist. (There was a third studio on the upper floor let to another painter.) The angled orientation of the house was cleverly managed so as to ensure high, slanting and even light from the north for de László to paint by. Visitors and sitters were given tantalising glimpses of the artist 'at home' as they passed through the family's living accommodation on the ground floor to the studios above. This processional route helped to create an air of theatrical suspense before the highpoint of any visit, entry into the airy studio where the poetic sensibility of the artist was concentrated.

Over the next couple of years de László completed portraits of General Arthur Görgey, the Emperor Franz Joseph, Empress Elisabeth, and their niece the Archduchess Elisabeth amongst others, but increasingly he spent time away from Budapest executing commissions in Britain, France, Holland and Italy. After only a few years of this restless existence, their new home was losing its appeal. According to his official biographer, by 1903 the artist

> had become so cosmopolitan that life in Budapest, even in the fine house which had given him so much delight to build, was not all that he imagined it would be. He found the narrowness and gossip of the small city irksome, and he had fallen out with Lippich, who was...saying that his former *protégé,* who owed so much to him, was now painting for financial success alone.[13]

A move to Vienna, which the couple found more congenial, was precipitated in August when their young baby daughter died. After camping out in a hotel for eight months they took a house with a studio and garden in the Theresianumgasse. In commercial terms Vienna was a more practical headquarters for de László's increasingly international practice. Many intending sitters outside Hungary were apparently not prepared to go as far as Budapest. Within a few years, however, he had painted most of the prominent people in not just Hungary but Central Europe, and needed a further move to maintain the momentum of his career.

At the age of 38 he was now ready to try London, the most significant bastion of portraiture at that time in Europe. The British tradition in this field of painting had been continued since the time of Holbein by a succession of artists, both British and foreign, includ-

11 Clifford, op. cit., 23.
12 Rutter, op. cit. 209.
13 Ibid., 217.

Hanover Terrace, overlooking Regent's Park, their first home in London

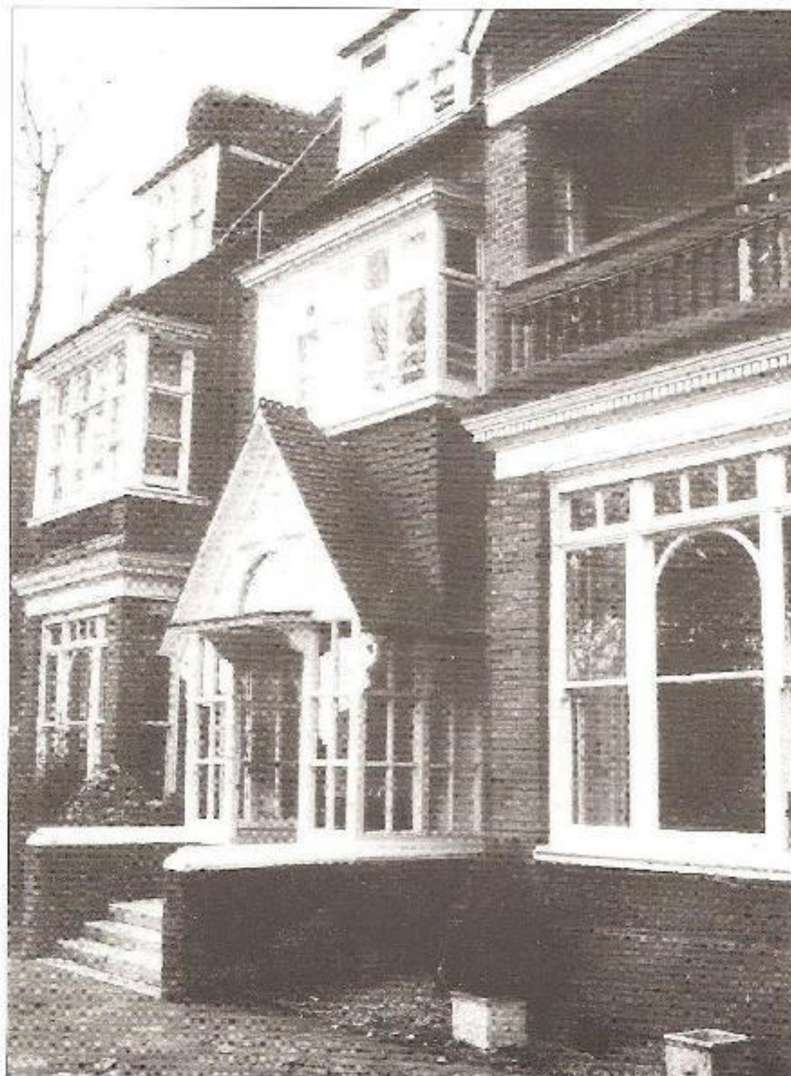
ing the likes of Van Dyck, Kneller, Angelica Kauffman, Reynolds, Gainsborough and Raeburn. The fame of the American-born John Singer Sargent, with whom de László was often compared, was then at its height in England. Already an anglophile by marriage, like many Hungarians de László also seems to have felt a spiritual affinity with Britain; 'he had a genuine affection and admiration for British people and for British institutions, in which he saw close parallels with those of his own country.' All of this led de László to feel that 'here indeed I could make my life, in this home of the art to which I was devoted, and that I might perhaps aspire to become a link, however humble, in the great chain of foreign artists who had been received and treated by England as her own sons.'[14] The way had been prepared by a positive review of his work in the October 1901 issue of *The Studio* magazine and the display of two portraits in London in 1904. Then amid a blaze of publicity engineered with the help of Count Mensdorff, the Austro-Hungarian ambassador, his first one-man exhibition opened at the Fine Art Society in Bond Street in May 1907. Fashionable London society flocked to the private view, and despite a mixed reception from the art critics, this debut was a huge success. The final seal of social approval was marked by a visit of the King and Queen to the exhibition and an immediate commission to paint their daughter Victoria.

Initially the family stayed in neoclassical grandeur at Hanover Terrace overlooking Regent's Park. Sensibly, de László steered clear of the somewhat too bohemian district of Chelsea which was associated with Whistler and his circle. Instead he then opted for a house at another expensive and prestigious address, 3 Palace Gate in Kensington. The house lacked a studio but had the necessary artistic credentials, being right next to the massive and lavishly appointed studio-house which had been constructed by Sir John Millais R. A. in 1873–8. The safely reactionary and old-fashioned glamour of the street matched de László's artistic style and social

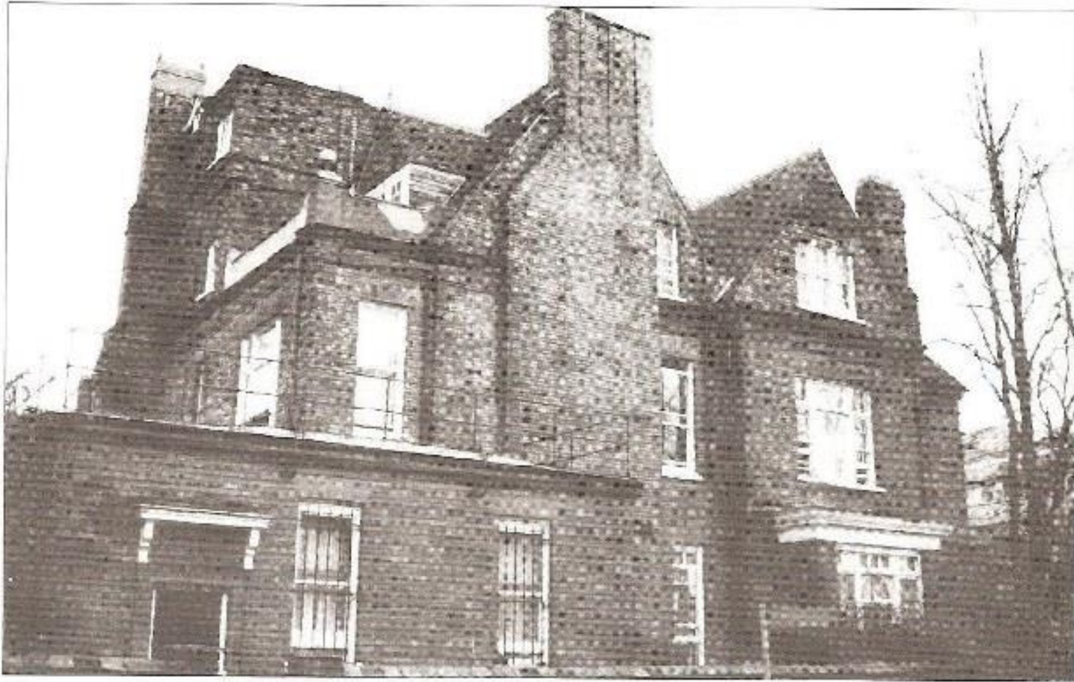
14. Ibid., 233.

aspirations perfectly. The nearby studio he found to rent at West House on Campden Hill, the other side of Kensington Gardens, also had a sound pedigree, having been designed in what de László described as 'good taste' by the famous architect Richard Norman Shaw R. A., in 1877–8. This was one of Shaw's more pretentious studio houses, commissioned by the American painter G. H. Boughton who, like de László after him, was 'appetitive of high society and Academy endorsement'.[15] The colossal studio had a gallery and wagon ceiling like that designed by Shaw for the artist Edwin Long R. A., and had already been frequently described and illustrated in the press. 'The prevailing impression of the house', Mrs. Haweis had written in 1880, 'is softness, refinement, harmony. There is nothing bizarre or eccentric'.[16] The studio walls were painted in a greyish drab offset by tapestries and rich oriental rugs on the floor.

The de Lászlós' last house on the Fitzjohn's Avenue, where they lived from 1921–37



15. Walkley, op. cit.
16. Extract from the ecstatic account given by Mrs Haweis in her book *Beautiful Homes* (London, 1883), 45–52.



Side elevation of de László's last house, 3 Fitzjohn's Avenue

In the period leading up to the first war de László's jam-packed client list reads like a compilation from Debrett, Burke and Who's Who. He also participated in the local artistic community of artists by giving up one morning a week to lead an advanced portrait class at the nearby New Art School in Kensington. This brought him into direct contact with leading British artists such as Frank Brangwyn and John Hassall who also taught there. [17]

Restless as ever, and increasingly irritated by the landlady of his studio, by 1914 he was writing long letters to his wife about buying a new house with a studio and garden. He evidently felt the need to reintegrate the social, domestic and artistic sides of his life. 'A united life,' he wrote, 'music, painting, personal taste expressed in the house—that is indeed a lovely prospect.'[18] In search of a more permanent studio home he started looking in St John's Wood and Hampstead. The area had all the right credentials, offering the aura of rural gentrification without being too stuffily respectable. One could combine the best of city and country—controlled development, good water, air quality and extensive views, with easy access by cab or suburban train to the theatres and restaurants of the city centre. Hampstead was also rich with literary and artistic associations. The famous Heath had continued to draw artists since the days when Constable and Linnel had painted there; also poets and writers from Shelley and Keats on.

It was to be years, however, before de László's projected move to Hampstead was realised. Although not directly involved in the mil-

17 Rutter, op. cit., 280.
18 Quoted in Rutter, op. cit., 282.

itary conflicts of the first World War, his experiences in London were personally traumatic. Anglo–Hungarian relations were fundamentally realigned when Hungary declared for the *Kaiser.* Despite his protestations and attempts to take British citizenship, de László was declared an alien and imprisonned as a collaborator for having sent money to Hungary. For someone who had invested so heavily in his adopted country England, and who so craved social status and admiration, the punishment was devastating, and led rapidly to a nervous breakdown.

In the years that followed the move to Hampstead now assumed great psychological significance. In 1921 it represented a new start, a relaunch of his social life and career. The capacious and comfortable property he and his wife settled upon was at the bottom of Fitzjohn's Avenue (number 3). Here they stayed for the next 16 years, longer than in any of their other homes. Until sold for development in 1875 by the Maryon Wilson family, this had been an extensive area of rising meadowland. [19] The new broad Avenue followed the line of an old footpath which linked St John's Wood to Hampstead Village. The status and quality of the development had been ensured by the breadth and planting of the avenue, the size of the individual plots and the stipulation in every contract that no house worth less than £3000 could be erected. [20] From the outset there were artists building new studio houses along the avenue. Edwin Long, for example, had commissioned not one, but two such homes from Norman Shaw in 1878 and 1891. Further down the avenue towards Swiss Cottage, the portrait painter Frank Holl followed suite with another Norman Shaw studio house at number 6 (1878), while Sir John Pettie commissioned the grandiose 'Lothians' next door, from fellow Scot William Flockhart. Soon the receding fields around the avenue were being enveloped in bricks and mortar. Development was rapid with houses being sold almost as soon as built. Some critics were decidedly snooty:

> It is not altogether obvious to an outsider why artists of late have shown such a predeliction for Fitzjohn's Avenue, South Hampstead. It is not a countrified spot, but rather a wilderness of brick fast being converted into houses more or less aping the Queen Anne style. It is, after all, just a long, uninteresting London street, with only this difference, that many of the houses are detached, and most make pretensions to artistic beauty—pretensions which in very few cases are justified...Yet this street is now the high artistic fashion, and the artists who of late have followed the modern tendency among their brethren of building houses for themselves after their own plans or ideas have pitched them here. [21]

The area continued to mop up a creditable number of fashionable artists, however, and by the time the de Lászlós moved in, the street

19 50 acres were sold to developers for £50,000.

20 C. Wade (ed.), *The Streets of Belsize, London* (The Camden History Society, 1991), 54.

21 H. Zimmern, 'Frank Holl's Studio', *The Magazine of Art,* 1885, 144-5.

22 *The Annals of Hampstead,* 1912.

had apparently matured into a 'commanding, tree-beautified avenue of stately dwellings.'[22]

It has not been possible to establish the architect of the house they acquired, but stylistically it fell into the category of 'more or less aping the Queen Anne style' in its use of red brick and terracotta ornament offset by white woodwork; also in the picturesque gabling, fenestration, and informality of the plan. While not cheaply or shoddily built, it was somewhat formulaic in its design, and in a style which was respectable but old-fashioned by 1921. Inside, a large inner hall gave access to a sequence of different sized public rooms on the ground floor, with stairs leading to the family rooms above. Visitors were received in the drawing room before passing through into an extensive garden where there was a large studio housed in a separate building, and a tennis court. As in his previous homes, there was an adjoining smaller studio for finishing work.

In the area arty types were mixed in with respectable professions such as civil engineers, manufacturers, insurance brokers. Next door for example lived the owner of Debenhams, the great London department store. Sir Max Pemberton described Fitzjohn's Avenue as 'the retreat of the successful'[23] and recalled how the artists in particular gave a distinctive character to St John's Wood. As a boy he was mesmerised by the influx of fashionable figures on 'Show Sunday' when the studio homes were opened to the public in advance of the Royal Academy opening; 'The Sunday parade should have been a source of inspiration and delight to the makers of fashion plates.'[24] Intellectuals such as Professor Huxley, the great collector Duveen, and numerous musicians added to the rich cultural mix. Characteristic of the milieu was a fundraising cricket match in 1932 between teams of actresses (captained by Gladys Cooper) and authors (led by J. B. Priestley). De László had painted many of those involved, and contributed that afternoon by auctioning a blank canvas on which he promised to paint a portrait for the highest bidder.[25] The day which was recorded at length in his biography, however, and which seems to have marked the highpoint in the closing phase of his career, was the public viewing in 1927 of a portrait commissioned by the Archbishop of Canterbury. As at his London debut in 1907, the famous and fashionable attended in their droves, and a red carpet was rolled from the front door for the Queen of Spain.

At the time of de László's death in 1937, a very different kind of Anglo–Hungarian artist's house was under construction nearby in the lower reaches of Hampstead. This was the distinctively modernist home of Ernő and Ursula Goldfinger at 2 Willow Road (see Gavin Stamp's article), which was representative of an altogether different intellectual and aesthetic ideology. As Goldfinger's critical

23. Quoted in an article by John Parkhurst held at the Camden local studies and archives centre, London: H728.3.
24. M. Pemberton, *Sixty Years Ago and After* (London 1936), 81.
25. *Hampstead and Highgate Express*, 16 July 1932.

reputation grew after World War Two, so de László's began to plummet, or as the *Hampstead and Highgate Express* rather crudely put it, 'ended up in the dustbin' like a bunch of wilting flowers.[26] The great studio houses had also had their day and were no longer the epicentre of fashionable life. As intellectual and artistic life moved on to something more intimate and less ostentatious 'it was the solidly rich businessmen and retired people of private means who sustained the district's character'.[27] Today it is difficult to recreate a sense of the smart and elegant buzz which once characterised 'one of the noblest streets in the world.'[28] Many of the most spectacular houses which once graced the avenue are now gone, demolished or bombed; others have been brutally converted into flats, or turned over to institutional use. Number 3 has survived, but only by virtue of being chopped up internally and the rear gardens being sold off for development. De László's old studio in the garden was converted to use as the Roman Catholic Church of St Thomas More and was eventually replaced by a new building in 1968–9.

In an evocative reflection on the present condition of Fitzjohn's Avenue, the novelist P. J. Cavanagh recently alluded to 'those exorbitant Victorian Mansions on either side, fantasy Presbyteries, turreted Gothic, with arched and inset balconies on which, surely, noone ever sat. Who were they built for, what orgulous caste? '[29] It is sad that the current owners of Number 3 are unable to answer this rhetorical question, despite a plaque on the exterior registering de László's occupancy. Indeed during my recent investigations the only 'fact' they could volunteer was that they thought the artist was Greek!

26 *Hampstead and Highgate Express*, 7 November 1969.
27 F. Thompson, *Hampstead Building and Borough 1650–1964* (London, 1974), 321.
28 C. Wade, op. cit., 55.
29 'Bywords', *Times Literary Supplement*, No 4983 (2 October, 1998), 18.