BERLIN — From Spain recently came news of a proposal by the government to erase all physical signs of the Franco dictatorship, as if by getting rid of the plaques and statues and street names from the old regime the country could rectify and obliterate a past it has preferred not to linger over. Meanwhile Polish voters just threw out a conservative government that wanted to drag up the past by holding job seekers accountable for their dealings under the Communists.

Americans tend to be amnesiacs. Europeans, however, worry history, and no writer in Europe today has dealt more eloquently with the obligations and moral conundrums of memory, private and collective, than the Hungarian novelist and essayist Peter Nadas. Berlin, it happens, is where he came years ago to work on what turned into “A Book of Memories,” which, when the Hungarian censors finally consented in 1986 to let it be published, invited comparison to Proust and Thomas Mann, and caused Susan Sontag, after its translation into English 11 years later, to call it “the greatest novel written in our time, and one of the great books of the century.”

Berlin is also where Mr. Nadas lived for a while, after the wall fell, on a fellowship. Here again for a few weeks, passing through on the way from Hungary to New York to promote the publication of a collection of short stories and essays, “Fire and Knowledge,” he met the other day for a coffee at Manzini’s, the cafe and sometime publishing hangout in west Berlin. In the morning, before the lunch crowd came, waiters in black vests and starched aprons laid white tablecloths and folded the day’s newspapers behind the brass rails along the wooden booths. When Mr. Nadas arrived, in overcoat and hat, he smiled stiffly, took a seat at a table near the back and absently ordered a cappuccino.

Measured, courtly, with short gray hair and wire-rimmed glasses, in his physical manner remarkably still but with a playful laugh and a dry sense of humor, at 65 he fits the bill of the world-weary Eastern European intellectual. During the early 1970s the Hungarian secret service, which had collected incriminating details of his love affairs to use as blackmail, offered to approve a trip that he wished to take abroad — he had proposed visiting places important to Mann like Rome and Munich — in exchange for his informing on those he met with.

The security agents suggested that the ban on the publication of his works would end. He pretended not to know there even was a ban, and declined the deal.

Now, he said about his forthcoming trip to New York, he found that to get a visa, he had to provide fingerprints and proof of his income for the last three months. “If my publisher hadn’t dealt with it, I wouldn’t go,” he remarked. “You have to protect yourself from terrorism. But I tried to live my life under the Communists without subjecting myself to state violation. I didn’t see the world until I was in my 30s because I wouldn’t accept the rules of the regime for travel. I would rather have isolation than be told what I can do by the state.”

Born in Budapest in 1942 (his first memory, from the age of 2, is of a fire in his house, when bombs were falling on the city), Mr. Nadas is the son of a working-class mother, who died of cancer when he was young, and a father, formerly a well-to-do bourgeois, who
became a state prosecutor for the Communists and committed suicide not long after Soviet tanks quashed the Budapest uprising in 1956. The failure of that revolution, he said, taught most Hungarians to feel powerless and also abandoned by the West, fostering a suspicion of foreigners that in the post-Communist era and thanks now to the splintering of European opinion over American relations, has bred a dangerous nationalism, which is obviously spreading throughout the former Soviet countries and elsewhere.

In an essay in the new book titled “Parasitic Systems,” Mr. Nadas recounts the Soviet-backed suppression of Czechoslovakia in 1968: “While windshield wipers on Hungarian military vehicles ceased to work because of all the spit expectorated by Czechoslovaks lining the streets, and as the Hungarian soldiers riding in the vehicles trembled and wept, President Johnson in a confidential telegram reassured General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev” that the United States would not interfere. Mr. Nadas, a young journalist back then, left his job and settled in a small village by the Danube to write fiction.

“For lack of something better to do, I resigned, walked out, and turned my back on the system to save my soul,” he wrote. The era of so-called peaceful coexistence, during the cold war, compromised everyone’s morals, and words — issued by Hungarian authorities, or shared among friends who couldn’t help suspecting one another of being informants, or coming from the West, which promised help but didn’t give it — no longer meant what they were supposed to.

Mr. Nadas recently reflected in a Hungarian newspaper, Elet és Irodalom, on the ambiguity of William Shirer’s reporting from Germany while trying to skirt Nazi censors. Under such circumstances, “an ambiguous sentence is a triumph,” Mr. Nadas noted. “The human spirit rejoices in single-handedly outsmarting the state police.”

But then, can someone in, say, Boston, “pouring sweet maple syrup over sizzling bacon” understand “from such ambiguous sentences how deformed the thoughts and actions of someone can become who for years has used their mother tongue for hiding thoughts rather than for expressing them?” he asked. “How meaning slips around in the shadow of words, hissing through the gaps in their definitions?”

After ’56 : “Hungary tried a socialist-capitalism that was like squaring a circle,” he recounted the other day. “Common knowledge then was that if you didn’t speak out you could go on with your little dealings. Gradually a second, then third economy developed — a culture of corruption. When the wall fell, we had a peaceful change from socialism, but the negative side was that communist functionaries gained power again by privatizing what they ran before. They simply used the old networks of corruption, which are now blossoming.”

Mr. Nadas began writing short stories when he was still a teenager, worked as a photojournalist before concluding he could no longer abide shooting happy proletarians to serve as government propaganda, and he wrote plays (Sontag once compared them to works by Pina Bausch and Thomas Bernhard) that, among other acts of political protest and independent expression, kept him in hot water with the authorities.

The struggle toward maturity as a novelist in works like “A Book of Memories” and in the three-volume “Parallel Stories,” a work of 18 years, published two years ago but not yet in English, was to turn what he has called the “monkey tricks of my sentences” into “honest” writing. That’s a metaphor, clearly, for what he feels are also the obligations of a political citizen.
Personal responsibility, which means confronting the consequences of one’s own compromised morality, is a recurrent theme in his writing about history and his literature. When asked about the proliferation of young Hungarian writers now, Mr. Nadas thought for a moment. “It’s the result of our non-isolation, which provides the freedom not to be politically engaged at all — on the contrary — they seem to have no interest in morality,” he said.

“They deal with the minutest details of life: how you lift a glass, what you see on a journey. But they don’t get involved in big ideas.”

“Recently I got into a fight with a military historian who thinks Hungary was the victim, Germany the perpetrator during the war,” he said. Patrons now started to occupy lunch tables nearby, the gray morning giving way to a cold, sunny Berlin afternoon. “It’s a beautiful story we tell ourselves, but Germany is unique in the world for having dealt head-on with the past and not just about the war.

“This confrontation,” he added, “is exactly what Hungarians, French, Dutch and Americans, among many others, have not done.”

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Not sure whether to write your novel in the past tense or the present tense? Stick with the past. It’s invisible to readers and more flexible for writers. It doesn’t make you a stylish writer or an original writer so much as a writer who makes offbeat choices. Another bottom line? The past tense is what readers expect, and what they therefore feel comfortable with. Present tense presumably became the tense of choice in literary fiction because it was different. Which probably means it will fall out of favor once it’s become the rule rather than the exception (and is therefore no longer different). But here’s the point; this is a story about an invalid who (spend) most of the day in bed. He has a powerful telescope and he (amuse) himself by watching the activities of the people in the opposite houses. One day when he (watch) No. 24 he (see) a murder being committed. Exercise 1 (Negatives are given in their contracted form, affirmatives are not given in their contracted form, but in speech present continuous tenses are normally contracted in the affirmative.) 1 are you going; am going, do you want 2 do you smoke; I don’t smoke, smokes, I do; spends 3 sees; are you spending 4 you usually go; belongs, wants; is using 5 go; takes, passes; is working, am queueing 6 Are you coming, are you waiting; think, wait, are, looks 7 are waiting; is dialling; Do you know Reading stories in past tense is so normal that reading present tense narratives can feel jarring and annoying to many readers. Some readers, in fact, won’t read past the few pages if your book is in present tense. That being said, from a technical perspective, present tense is perfectly acceptable. I was talking with a writer friend today who used to have strong feelings against present tense. If she saw the author using it in the first paragraph of a novel, she would often put the book back on the bookstore shelf. Then, she read The Hunger Games, one of the most popular recent examples of a present tense novel (along with All the Light We Cannot See), and when she realized well into the book that the novel was in present tense, all those negative opinions about it were turned on their heads. Present tense, Past tense, Present perfect tense, Past perfect tense, Future tense, Future perfect tense. GW Henderson - English Grammar by Parallelism and Comparison (1910) [Archive.org] has the same six tenses as Welsh. In The English Language; its Grammar, History and Literature 1896 JMD Meiklejohn talks of three chief tenses, each with three subdivisions - Indefinite, Perfect and Imperfect [Archive.org (Boston 1896)]. He then mentions Perfect continuous tenses, and ends up listing the full twelve tenses: [Archive.org]. English of the present day not only has a tense for each of the time divisions - past, present, future - but has other tenses to correspond with those of highly inflected language, such as Latin and Greek. The historical present is the use of a verb phrase in the present tense to refer to a past event. Learn more with the help of some glossary terms. “Verbs in the ‘historic present’ describe something that happened in the past. The present tense is used because the facts are listed as a summary, and the present tense provides a sense of urgency. This historic present tense is also found in news bulletins. The announcer may say at the start, ‘Fire hits a city center building, the government defends the new minister, and in football City, United lose.’” (“Language Notes,” BBC World Service.) I have a great determination to feel the sentence as a reality. But it always escapes me. I will be dead comes with a picture of a dead body on a bed. But it’s mine, a nine-year-old body.