

though it was a respectable wage at the time, I declined the kind offer and in September I returned to the university.

### *The capital city in revolt*

The Budapest I returned to was not the same as the one I left to do my practicum. The process of thawing that had begun with the death of Stalin three years earlier was now at a point close to boiling. It was hard to concentrate on one's studies. The political news was conflicting and confusing. The Russians, it seemed, were trying to reform their system at home but were afraid of losing control in "the satellite states". First they installed the reformer Imre Nagy as Prime Minister, while to replace the Stalinist prime minister Rákosi retained his position as First Secretary of the Communist Party, the number one position in the nation. Rákosi did everything in his power to undermine Nagy's reform policies. Soon they put Rákosi back for a while, only to replace him with another hardliner, Ernő Gerő. But the reformers in the party did not want let go of Nagy. Although Nagy, being a loyal to Muscov, did all he could to discourage even his friends from gathering around him – both for the sake of their safety as his own – he was nevertheless widely regarded as an alternative to the hardliners by everyone. The reforms he initiated during his short stint as prime minister, for example put a stop to enforced collectivisation, ease up the expedited manner of national industrialization, release political and economic prisoners, designed "to put a human face on socialism" – quite a comment on the times – were nixed by Moscow, and not forgotten. But some of Nagy's friends

had more guts than he did and carried on. Led by these intellectuals there was a movement afoot inside the party to shift away from the Stalinist mode and toward Nagy's. The heretofore tightly controlled *Irodalmi Újság* (Literary Gazette) became a forum for the reformers and some of the country's leading writers became involved.

At school we were talking politics all day and getting sick of talking. We wanted to do something, to act. When news of the October 21<sup>st</sup> Poznan workers' uprising demonstrations came from Poland, factory workers demanded higher wages, free elections and a release of W. Gomulka from prison confinement, we wanted to show our support by organizing a demonstration of our own. As we were organizing, confusion reigned. Gerő's government first authorized the demonstration, then forbade it, then acquiesced again. For sure, there would have been fewer of us to start the march if it was forbidden, for fear of the secret police was still strong, and we would have been risking our careers if we ignored the government order. But it would not have mattered anyway. So many others joined our march on the street that our numbers seemed insignificant. The events of October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1956 are well known.

In the early hours student delegations visited the factories to talk to the workers ensuring them that our demonstration planned for the afternoon was going to be a peaceful one. We were going, among other items, to express our solidarity with our brothers in Poland and East Germany, and to demand domestic economic and political reforms. With that in mind, a group of four of us visited the April 4 Factory. We got as far as the gate, where an official met us.

“Listen to me, young comrades”, he said sternly, “you better get back to school and behave yourselves, or else, the good people of Hungary will crush your foolish revolution.”

For the record, our original idea was not to mount a revolution nor to overthrow the government, but to incite reform.

The demonstration, as planned, started at 2 p.m. We gathered in front of our university building on Petőfi Square. After listening to patriotic speeches and Imre Sinkovits popular actor reciting Petőfi’s National poem (Talpra magyar!), we marched to the memorial dedicated to Joseph Bem, the Polish General, who fought on the side of Hungarians during the 1848-1849 revolution. At this place the first national flag appeared with a hole in the centre. From there we moved on, and on to the Parliament Building. People were jubilant all along the streets, encouraging us, student marchers increasingly joined by thousands of others. There were national flags lowered from the windows (I never imagined there were so many traditional Hungarian flags without the hammer and sickle, the despised communist emblem, in them, left in the country.) From there on there were more flags with a hole in them, hanging from windows and balconies. By the time we reached the parliament buildings, tens of thousands of people had amassed. After a long wait, the formerly deposed Prime Minister, Imre Nagy arrived and addressed the crowd by saying:

“Comrades!”

“We’re not comrades”, the crowd shouted in response.

Late in the evening we marched to the Museum Square and to the Radio Building on Sándor Bródy Street, where student delegates requested the broadcasting of the 16 Point proclamation as the demands of the nation. The secret police opened fire at them

from the darkened windows of the Radio Building. Large convoys arrived from the industrial district of Csepel, loaded with young armed workers.

This combination of events turned the peaceful demonstration into open revolution. Shortly after midnight, when Soviet tanks stationed outside the capital city invaded Budapest, the revolution gave way to a war of independence, a war between two socialist nations. But by early November our October Revolution, which came to be admired by the West as an event that shook the world, was crushed – a matter of less than three weeks. A new “Revolutionary Government” was initiated by the Soviet Union, headed by János Kádár, a former victim of the regime. With him tyranny replaced tyranny.

On November 4, the soviet onslaught reached me in Nyíregyháza, where I had been sent by the Revolutionary Council with four of my colleagues to assist in setting up a democratic administration. We were stationed in the City Hall. The day after our arrival in the city, in the early hours I noticed through the window that two tanks were stationed in the middle of the street, their turrets pointing straight at our building. At that very moment Prime Minister Imre Nagy was calling out to the world by radio that his government was in place and that the Russian forces had initiated an invasion. He asked the Western governments for help. It would never arrive. I alerted my colleagues in the next rooms and we escaped through a back door. We knew then that it was over.

I got a ride to Nyírbélték (where my parents still lived. By then the collective farm had been disbanded and my parents became independent small holders again. They were broke, as their farm animals and agricultural equipment, confiscated at the time of

their joining the collective farm had not been reinstated to them. The good land they had owned previously was retained by the so called State Farm. In exchange they had received eleven hectares of wasteland some kilometers from town. It was touching how some of the good neighbours had volunteered their help by lending the essential tools and equipment until my parents managed to get somehow on their feet) in a bus transporting home transient industrial workers.

I staid with my family for several weeks until the end of December, most lethargic and depressed, not knowing how to go back to the university and live under the tyrannical previous regime. On December 19, the local administration received word from Nyíregyháza, informing that “visitors” from the Party Headquarters were coming to “enquire” about my activities during the past months. I was tipped off in advance by the head of the town council, who was a relative of ours, advising me to disappear for a few days. “But don’t do anything hasty!” he cautioned me.

Just the day before, János Kádár had made the radio announcement, saying that those who find the new government policy disagreeable, let them take their hats and leave. That’s when I realized that it would be safer if I escaped the country. The family discussed the situation, and agreed that I’d do best to defect. My brother Károly wanted nothing more than to come with me and join our brother Tony, of whom we had learned that he had crossed the border to Austria. Károly was a thin, weakly young fellow and I was afraid that he wouldn’t be able to handle the ordeal. And it was heartbreaking to think that our parents would be left behind totally alone. Dad suggested that if I made it to Canada, get in touch with relatives there, and especially with his buddy, János Dobos,

my godfather. Sadly, I never looked up my godfather, partly out of pride, as he never showed any interest in us.

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The first map of Hungary is said to have been prepared in or about 1515 by Lazarus Rosetus, at the request of Tamás Bakócz, Prilate of Esztergom. He was the same Bakócz whose aspiration for the appointment to the Papacy had been failed. He wasn't elected.

### *A farewell to the homeland*

My mother packed up some sausage and a few slices of bread. We bid tearful farewell next morning and I left my hometown with two of my friends, Mihály and Miklós. For reasons unclear to me, my parents seemed relieved to see me leave. I did not recognize their selflessness, and was quite bitter for years in Canada, believing that they just wanted to get rid of me. I later came to realize that my parents wanted a better life for me. They did not want me to go through the ordeal that they had experienced through their lives: lost wars, defeated revolutions, foreign invasions, personal harassments, high taxes, enforced collective farms. To say nothing of what my fate would have been when the “visitors from Party Headquarters” arrived.

We arrived in Budapest late that evening. It was a sad sight to see the not long-ago beautiful city in darkness and complete ruin.

I was a patriotic Hungarian and could not imagine a life outside of my country of birth. A year before I had been offered a five-year scholarship to continue my studies in China. There, I

would participate in the struggle to make that country a wonderful place in which to live, an opportunity I declined. Now I was torn about leaving the nation that had invested so much in me. I had hoped to become an influential Hungarian writer, following the footsteps of my heroes, Zsigmond Móricz, Ferenc Móra, and Péter Veres.

We spent the night at the Déli train station, waiting to make our attempt at escape. The trains were arriving and departing, filling the air with sulfurous steam. State thugs came during the night, demanding our identifications. I told them that I came back to university from home, ready to rebuild the city. They nodded in agreement.

They were not as agreeable with a young fellow in the fine uniform of the military academy. They grabbed him, marched him outside. Later he came back, hair tousled, wiping blood off his face. There was a loud Bulgarian fellow yelling at the hoods, saying what a goddamned government this was.

One of the thugs told him that he was a lousy immigrant. The country had given him a good life. “You came here from Bulgaria and you became prosperous. You should be more grateful”, he went on. The Bulgarian yelled back, “No, I owe gratitude for nothing! And I am leaving this shit country and will never set foot in it.” The group took him, marched him out into the darkness and he never came back. It was a fearful night.

In the morning we boarded the train heading towards the border at Hegyeshalom. The train was jammed with travelers, most of them fellow dissidents, some of them standing on the steps of the cars, their bicycle dangling in their hands. It was a depressing experience. I couldn't escape the thought of the past few weeks'

events. What had happened? What did we do wrong? How come the Poles had managed a good deal while we had failed so miserably? Was it because we moved too fast? Was it because we wanted too much too soon?

It had started so well. The revolutionary government was in place. It accomplished a great deal within a few days. It abolished the one-party system. It put a stop to enforced collectivization of private farms. Even Moscow seemed to have listened and the Soviet arm forces started to leave the country. New parties came into existence overnight: the Independent Small Holders, the Peasant (Petófi) Party, and the Social Democrats, all well and active. Maybe the government did not have adequate support of the people. It was obvious that there were too many factions creating too many demands. The new parties showed reluctance in joining the government. There was total chaos. Perhaps it was a crucial mistake to announce our withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact. It was obvious that Moscow and even the members of the Pact would react violently to that decision.

At the town Lébény, some twenty kilometers from the border, we got off the train. Coming across a group of people, standing by the sidewalk, chatting away, we easily made friends with them. “Are you leaving, too?” they asked us. “Yes”, replied Miklós, the eldest of us, who later in Canada became Nick. “Our young friend”, he continued, pointing at me, “got deeply involved and now he has to get across the border at all cost”. “Is that a fact?” they looked at me with sympathy. “In that case, we’ll have to help you.”

We ordered some home-made wine and raised glasses to the homeland and to our (indefinite) future. After ordering another round, two men volunteered to show us the easy way to the Austri-

an border. But it was not to be. The men turned out to be easy-going, indifferent characters. As I remember them now, they were not bad men, only too careful or lazy to take the trouble and risk the consequences arising from leading us through the endless marshland to the border. Seeking help to get across the border, we were directed to two guides – who turned out to be pseudos. Misleading us, they left us behind not far from where we had departed a few hours earlier. After that we were on our own. Following the stars towards the West, we got lost in the never-ending swampy fields of Hanság, walking aimlessly, me in summer shoes.

During this ordeal I couldn't help reminiscing my childhood, my family, and the wonderful years at school. As mentioned, I never imagined leaving my homeland. But then again, these were times of uncertainty, of constant fear in which everyone lived. I, for example, had omitted from my compulsory biography in high school that was to follow me for the rest of my career, the fact that my grandfather had spent seven years in the United States (in itself a cause for 'reeducation'), and, worse, that after returning home he purchased sixty hectares of select land near the town, he had been declared by the authorities a *kulák* and his family was exposed to constant harassment. *Kulák* meant being a prosperous farmer and employing labourers for carrying out menial work. *Kuláks* were considered by the regime ruthless exploiters of the working class, as a result, needed to be eliminated. I have also neglected to include the fact that my parents had owned a grocery store before the Russian occupation and that my father was the local president of the Independent Smallholders' Party. Omissions of this nature would sooner or later backfire, leading to serious consequences.

The journey was exhausting. The sodden and deserted countryside of the Hanság was crisscrossed with knee-deep ditches full of water, their edges overgrown by tall grass. Inadvertently stepping on them, one ended up in the bottom, the summer shoes filled, trousers soaked. It went on for the duration of the night. Nowhere a light to be seen, not even a lone star left in the now overcast sky to point the direction. Not a sound to be heard, not even a dog barking. But I felt I did the right thing to undertake this journey.

We spent two months in Austria – a few weeks in a refugee camp near Linz, the rest in Vienna in a refugee camp at Dadlergasse 16. The one-time capital city of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was beautiful. It was with some irony that I observed the elegant, historical buildings and streets and parks in complete repair. I was envious of the happy people carrying on without any sign of anxiety. The refugee camps were well organized; there was tasty food at the university dining room; big shiny luxury automobiles and streetcars swished along the streets. I never felt so desolate in my life. I was homesick. I felt guilty for leaving my homeland in its greatest need, darkness and ruin.

In the refugee camps I came across a few of my colleagues, most of them not of model types. Many students, especially in the Humanities, did not belong at university at all, and did not even want to be there. The only reason they decided to stick it out was to escape the three-year compulsory military service. I wished I could go back home. I wished that no Western country would accept me. Even during the screening session at the Canadian Embassy, where most of the candidates tried to give the

impression that they had been great heroes during the revolution, I tended to underplay my role in those tumultuous events. I was stolid, and gave the impression that I didn't take this whole thing seriously. The aristocratic-looking lady interpreter turned to me and whispered in my ear:

“Look out, man. If you keep on like this you'll never set foot in Canada!”