

## Balázs Somogyi

### A Nation Ascending

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#### Expectations

The summer and fall of 1956 were full of excitement and expectations in Hungary. Mátyás Rákosi, “Stalin’s Best Disciple” resigned from the Central Committee of the Hungarian Communist Party, euphemistically named the “Hungarian Workers’ Party,” in July. The month of August was hot and sunny, and it was relatively unproductive of significant news.

During September, on the other hand, we experienced the renewal of exciting political developments. The press began to expose the crimes and atrocities of the Rákosi-regime.

Gyula Hay, a well-known and popular writer, had written a widely circulated article and enumerated the “natural” rights of the literary creator, including the responsibility of telling the truth, the right of criticizing anybody or anything, to be sad or ecstatically in love., to believe in God or to deny God’s existence among others.

The Petöfi Kör (Petöfi Circle) initiated a movement of establishing intellectual forums throughout Hungary; with increasing openness; these examined the problems the country and the nation had faced. On the 6th of October, the remains of László Rajk , György Pálffy, Tibor Szőnyi and András Szalai were reinterred, with military pomp and circumstance. In the middle of October, Imre Nagy’s membership in the Party (MDF) was restored. On the 16th of October, the demands, voiced during a well-attended meeting of university students of Szeged, included the elimination of the compulsory teaching of the Russian language and significant reforms of university life. The students declared DISZ (Democratic Youth Society) to be irrelevant and re-established MEFESZ (Union of Hungarian University and Academy Students). Within days, the student bodies of Pecs, Miskolc and Sopron followed suit; finally, on October 22nd, the university students of Budapest joined in the movement and voiced their grave dissatisfaction with life in the universities. These were exciting, heady times, indeed— only an incendiary spark was needed!

#### Students on the 23rd

23rd of October 1956 fell on a Tuesday, with warm, unusually pleasant and mild weather. The excitement was palpable throughout Budapest; students, workers, office employees openly discussed the developments in groups. The assembly at the Polytechnic Faculty (Muegyetem) produced the famous 14 points - these contained significant demands of reforms, related to the establishment a system of human rights, national independence and the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary. The medical students of the Semmelweis University of Budapest (I was in my first year at that time) were definitely not in the forefront of activities and decision-making on that fateful day, but our enthusiasm and willingness to join in the demands for reforms was unquestionable.

A well-organized and enthusiastic demonstration started at the Statue of Petöfi; from here the demonstrators marched to the statue of Bem on the Buda side of the capitol; here they listened to a speech by Péter Veres, writer and one-time Minister of Defense, sang the Hungarian anthem, the “Marseilles” and the “Kossuth Song.” One of the students read the “Fourteen Points.”

Imre Nagy spoke to the crowd at the Parliament - his address, recommending calm, restoration of the peace and return to home, was a source of disappointment. When he started to sing the Hungarian anthem, however, the crowd started to disperse. But many of those in the square did not return to their homes immediately. Instead, they walked to Dozsa Gyorgy ut in order to participate in or, at least, witness the toppling of the Statue of Stalin. Others proceeded to the building of the Hungarian Radio at Bródy Sándor Street. The demonstrators demanded access to the airwaves, in order to broadcast their demands, including a reading of the “Fourteen Ponto.” A

military force of 300-350, members of the ÁVO (the infamous State Security Authority) and soldiers had occupied the building in order to defend it. The standoff soon developed into a siege: the demonstrators hurled pieces of materials from a nearby construction site, while the defenders used teargas canisters or their bayonets. Finally after the use of preliminary warning shots, rounds of live volleys rang out repeatedly, and a number of demonstrators were wounded or died. The Revolution of October 23rd had become a historical fact.

Ernő Gerő, the newly and hastily appointed Secretary General of MDP, requested the military intervention of the Soviet Army, and the leadership in Moscow promptly complied. Contingents of the Soviet army reached Budapest in the early hours of October 24th - as a result, the Hungarian capitol had become a war zone.

### **Glorious days**

Twelve glorious days followed: Hungarians, students, workers, children,-poorly armed; only occasionally reinforced- participated in a fierce combat in the streets of Budapest; they consistently exhibited remarkable heroism against overwhelming military odds, against a superior military force, and, at the end, miraculously, they were victorious.

In scenes reminiscent of the battle of Budapest during World War II the streets and squares of the capital were littered with derailed and disabled street cars, burned-out tanks and other military vehicles; while the victims of the combat- Hungarian fighters and Russian soldiers- were lying dead and, frequently, unattended for days. The stench at Nagykorut was overwhelming in those days. I saw when Stalin's metallic head (previously part of the fallen statue in Varosliget) was hacked apart by angrily dedicated Hungarians at the corner of Rakoczi ut and Nagykorut. I also had the pleasure of warming my hands at the bonfire built from Soviet periodicals that had been heaved out of the Russian language bookstore, close to Oktogon.

As a medical student, I was called upon to work in a hospital, administering to the wounded; we were providing care to Hungarians and Russians alike. Using our rudimentary knowledge of Russian, we had repeatedly attempted to obtain information from the wounded soldiers regarding their conceived role in the fighting. The soldiers, most of them merely young boys, were frightened and confused. Some of them believed that they had been in battle at the Suez Canal.

The misery the military conflict had caused in human lives was frequently heart-rending. I shall never forget the sense of devastated horror of a beautiful sixteen-year old girl, upon learning that her left leg had to be amputated above her knee.

Political parties were organized within a few days. As the practical result of the newly instituted freedom of the press, newspapers were printed and widely circulated ; they presented a bewildering variety of opinions. We were overwhelmed,excited,almost intoxicated by the prospects of democratic change, independence and neutrality!

The Central Committee in Moscow appeared to have agreed to the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungarian soil - it appeared that the Revolution was victorious and our country was to become free and independent. A completely stunning historical development indeed!

### **November 4th**

In the early hours of November 4th, five Soviet divisions attacked the Hungarian fighting force, and the cruel reality of a tragically unavoidable defeat became much too apparent. Imre Nagy, Prime Minister of Hungary, informed the nation and the world: Hungary was being attacked by an overwhelming military force. The last message by Free Kossuth Rádío was, unfortunately , quite futile in its tragic eloquence: "Help Hungary! Provide help for the Hungarian nation! Help the Hungarian writers, scientists, workers, peasants and intellectuals! Help! Help! Help!"

### **Conclusions**

If attempting to evaluate the significance of the Revolution and Freedom Fight of 1956, my conclusions are unequivocal. The events and developments of October-November 1956 have proved to be the most significant defining experiences of my lifetime. I am truly grateful to my fate for the gift of witnessing a heroic nation, fighting for liberty and independence. I find it is inescapable to conclude that the Revolution and Freedom Fight of 1956 were triumphant historical events in their true context. They elevated Hungary's image in the eyes of the civilized world, and the nation had truly "ascended" as the result of those glorious twelve days. The Hungarian Revolution did provide

an early and significant impetus for the eventual break-up of the Soviet Empire and it had proved conclusively that the Soviet power was not invincible; as a matter of fact, it had become obvious that the Empire was highly vulnerable. I am convinced that those of us who lived in Hungary and had the opportunity to experience the miracle of 1956, had witnessed a remarkable historical moment during a most auspicious period in the life of 20th century Hungary.

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