

Károly G. Oláh

## Unwavering

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I remember it as if it were happening today. On October 23, I was on my way home from work at Budapest's Central Physics Research Institute. From the window of the tram I saw many people hurrying along the streets carrying posters and flyers, pasting them up on walls and kiosks. As soon as I got off the tram, I read one of them: it was the demands of the Hungarian nation, summarized in 16 points.

I couldn't believe my eyes. Oh my heavens, I thought, if even half of those demands were to come true, how great that would be. Occupied by these thoughts, I walked home toward my rented room on Puskin Street. Then I caught sight of the crowds on Rákóczi Avenue, making their way toward the Parliament. I joined them. We chanted in unison – 4,000 of us at the top of our lungs – “Whoever is Hungarian is with us!” “Russians go home!” and so forth. The crowd kept growing. Once we reached the Parliament, I saw that more demonstrators were joining us from different directions, all calling out the same slogans. By nightfall, there were more than 100,000 of us on the square.

## Imre Nagy

One group of demonstrators was demanding that Imre Nagy come out and speak to us. Imre Nagy did appear and addressed the crowd over the loudspeakers in that resounding microphone voice of his. He began his speech: “Comrades!” At this, the crowd booed – we were not comrades! He tried saying “comrades” twice more, but we didn't let him continue. Finally he changed his tack: “My esteemed Hungarian fellow citizens!” This we accepted with great delight. As he spoke, we felt that his words were heartfelt, and gave us hope that we might be liberated from the system of communist terror.

Suddenly, about a hundred people called out that we should go at once to the Radio building, because Ernő Gerő was speaking, and we had to stop him. Together with the crowd, I proceeded to the Hungarian Radio, where the events sped up. A Secret Policeman fired into the crowd. By the time we got there, several people were dead and more were injured. Soldiers on a military truck at the corner of Bródy Street were passing out weapons. I got a 9mm-s Frommer revolver, which I then put in my pocket, because I was asked to help transport the wounded. Thus I ended up at the freedom fighter unit at the Péterfy Sándor Street Hospital, where I held out until I was injured on November 6.

## Getting hold of a car

I became good friends with a 23-year-old architect named Karcsi Bede. He lived right next door to the hospital, but he never went home because we were so busy transporting the wounded. With the first lull in the fighting, a group came over to me and asked whether I knew anything about cars. Not much, I said, but a little. They told me they'd found a few hundred brand-new Russian passenger cars, the “Pobeda” model, but they couldn't start them – could I help? Of course, I replied, and off we went in an old black American Buick to the lot. I determined that the distributor of each car was missing the so-called “pipe” and that's why there was no ignition. They fetched the warehouse supervisor and I drew a picture of the missing part. He led us to a box that was filled with the missing parts. That very day we took five cars to the hospital. Two days later, not a single Pobeda car remained on the lot. I got one too – naturally for hospital purposes. We used it to run official errands; we used it to take captured secret police to the former Népszava newspaper building for interrogation by Jozsef Dudás and his associates.

One night I was asked to take a group of journalists out to the northern part of Budapest, and as I turned onto the boulevard leading out of the city center, we were suddenly attacked by a volley of gunfire. I pulled over

and stopped, then – revolver in hand – walked over to the nearby square to find out who was shooting at us. I was wearing a tricolor armband. In the dim light I made out about eight shadowy figures. I asked them: “Why did you shoot, boys?” They replied: “Because you didn’t stop. You have to understand: if you don’t stop, we’ll shoot your eyes out.” Then I countered: “There are plenty of you guys, yet you didn’t even hit the car.” As it turned out, on earlier occasions, when the freedom fighters stopped cars for identification, some of the passengers were Secret Police, who then proceeded to shoot them. That’s why the freedom fighters were stopping cars by yelling at them – but I hadn’t heard them. The next morning I noticed three bullets in the rear bumper on the driver’s side, but no one had been hurt.

### **Transporting the wounded**

One day I was sent to Mária Street to retrieve the wounded. We proceeded amid gunfire all around. Suddenly, two Russian soldiers jumped in front of us, aimed their machine guns and ordered us to stop. They forced us out of the car and into a doorway.

Well, Karcsi, I told my friend, this is it. These guys are going to shoot us. My pistol was in my belt, hidden under my coat. Luckily, the soldiers did not search us. About eight Russian soldiers, who had been shot, lay in the courtyard; two were still alive. The Russian indicated with his machine gun that we were to take the two wounded soldiers. I was suddenly relieved, realizing that our lives were safe, and could soon return to the hospital. However, in the meantime freedom fighters had started taking up cobblestones from the street to make barricades, and so we could not drive out to Üllői Street. The freedom fighters approached us and asked what we were up to. I explained that we were out on the orders of the Péterfy Hospital and taking in the wounded. But you have Russian soldiers, they said; why is that? I said that I had no choice in the matter; two Russians had blocked our way and forced us... Yes, we saw all that, said one freedom fighter. So what happens now? There are Hungarian wounded here too. Well, what else – I replied – we’ll unload the Russians and take the Hungarians in. And that’s what we did. We managed to roll our way out to Üllői Street on planks laid out over the ditches, and so returned to the hospital.

A few days later, when the guns were quiet and the fighting over, we were ordered to gather up the bodies of the Russian soldiers killed on Üllői Street. Some of these Russians had been shot so intensively that when we tried to toss their bodies up onto the truck, they literally fell apart, and we were slipping and falling in the puddles of blood on the blood-soaked street.

### **Attack on party headquarters**

I was there, on Köztársaság Square, at the attack on the communist party headquarters. The treacherous Secret Police let the freedom fighters close to the building. When there were about 200 of the demonstrators standing about 50 meters from the building, the Secret Police let loose with a volley of gunfire. There were many dead and wounded. One of my colleagues was shot dead here, even though he was carrying a stretcher and wearing a white coat with a red cross. The Secret Police repeated this base maneuver three times. But it did not last, because two more tanks joined the first one, which started firing into the windows of the headquarters. At this, the Secret Police surrendered. The rightfully outraged crowd, however, began literally taking apart the Secret Police emerging from the building, who had outfitted themselves in new blue police uniforms and army boots. Three such dead “policemen” were hung upside down on trees and spat at. The crowd had indeed lost its head – this was because the Secret Police, those criminals, had lured our freedom fighters into a deathtrap. And so the people brought down their judgment...

We caught one Secret Policeman, who was still alive, and about 10 of us surrounded him. I shouted: We’ll leave him alone! At this, a revolutionary stuck a gun in my side, he wanted to kill me, saying that I must be Secret Police too, since I was defending this guy. Come with me to Dudás, I told him, he’ll be interrogated there! At this, my accuser calmed down. Meanwhile, another revolutionary took his rifle by the barrel and smashed the handle into the Secret Policeman’s head with such force that his brains spilled out among us. He died immediately. The reason I had insisted that we interrogate him was the following: we had learned that arrested college students were being held underground, beneath the headquarters building. The party denied this and continues to deny it to this day! I will never forget standing in front of the headquarters on November 3 and feeling a strong pounding coming from underground. We did not know what it could be. Apparently the arrested students and revolutionaries were being held there. They were trying to break out and were probably hitting the ceiling with some heavy object. This was a question worth pursuing! At the time, a

bulldozer was brought in, but began digging in the wrong place. The next day they would have continued digging, but by then it was no longer possible – the Red hordes had returned. This issue remains a mystery to this day. Many people have talked about the underground labyrinths and the fact that truckloads of cement were brought in after the Revolution and poured into a hole. What could have been there underneath? This should be investigated, for our sakes and for the sake of history.

At dawn on November 4, I awoke to the sound of thundering cannons. I suspected the worst. The Russians had returned to attack Budapest. The fighting flared up; there were many wounded; and we had no respite. We transported the injured day and night, surrounded by shooting on all sides.

### **Wounded**

On November 6, the hospital asked me to take a Mother and her newborn baby home to the “House of Lords,” which was actually a poorhouse. Driving along Dohány Street, I suddenly heard a volley of gunfire. “Drop down!” I shouted, and I ducked underneath the steering wheel, keeping my left hand on the wheel and pressing the brake pedal with my right. Then came the second round of gunfire. The car stopped. I waited to see what would happen next. Then I felt something dripping down my face. I touched it and then saw it was blood. They shot me, I thought. Then I wondered if I were alive. I started pinching myself to see if I felt anything, and I did. Then I looked at my partner, Karcsi Bede, who was pouring blood. It was his blood on my face. I pushed the door open with my foot, jumped out and ran into a building entrance where about 15 young freedom fighters were standing. I glanced back at the car, but no one was moving there. I asked the boys to bring my bleeding friend inside. No way, they say, they’ll shoot us! At this I ran over to the car and tried to open the door with my left hand, but couldn’t because my left arm hurt so much I was incapable of opening the door. I looked at my left arm and saw that the sleeve of my sweater was ragged and covered with blood. (I still have this sweater, a cherished memento.) So I too had been shot, but had felt nothing more than two light taps as the bullet and 18 pieces of shrapnel entered my arm. The boys saw that the shooting had stopped, so they came over to help remove the wounded Karcsi from the car. They pulled him out and brought both of us into a nearby apartment. They brought me a large mug of hot tea: Drink up! they said. As I swallowed the last gulp, I realized it was rum, not tea. I soon fell asleep and awoke in the Péterfy Hospital. Karcsi lay beside me, his head bandaged. His parents were at his bedside, talking to him, but he remained silent. I told his parents what had happened; a while later they went home. Then Karcsi, who could not speak and was paralyzed on his left side, turned to me with what seemed to me a slight smile at the corner of his mouth. I asked the doctor why he had not responded to his parents, yet had seemed to smile at me. Yes, replied the doctor, his injury affected the part of his brain with memories of long ago, but I was a recent friend, so he remembered me.

Karcsi took three bullets – two in the shoulder and one in the back of his skull. After three brain surgeries he died. Karcsi (Károly) Bede died a hero of our Revolution. May he rest in peace! His brother László Bede was imprisoned for 15 years for his part in the Revolution. I was one of the lucky ones. When I picked up something with my left hand, I could not let it go, but the doctor said this was due to a radial nerve having been severed by a piece of shrapnel. He said that in time, the nerve endings would reconnect themselves. After six months, this came to pass, but to this day I still have 18 pieces of shrapnel in my arm, causing me various problems from time to time.

### **Flight**

After a few days, we were informed that the Russians, together with the Secret Police, were rounding up the wounded and taking them away in tanks, and that we should immediately go into hiding. I left the hospital and went to the countryside. I did not dare return to my parents’ home in the village of Ukk, because I’d received word that the authorities had been there looking for me. One night after Christmas I went home, but my parents asked me to go away immediately, because the postman had told them that the authorities were still searching for me.

I went to the town of Dudár and from there I started on my journey West. I crossed the border in the first week of January 1957. Once I reached Austria, the Red Cross took me to Vienna for medical treatment, then to the refugee camp run by the Austrian Ministry for the Interior. I came to America in 1959. I worked at Rutgers University as associate head of the engineering staff, retiring in 1995. In 1996, I had a heart operation. In 1998, I enrolled in the New Brunswick Theological Seminary in New Jersey. I was ordained a minister on

May 11, 2004, but by the grace of God I have served the congregation at the Hungarian Presbyterian Church in Wharton, NJ, since 2000.

I never regretted my actions. I was no hero, because the heroes are those who gave their lives for their country. If I had to serve the Revolution today, I'd do the same again for my country. It pains me to think of my country of birth, which I can only visit now as a tourist, but cannot return home for good. I suffer from homesickness, but my wife Ágnes' work ties her to the United States, and it would be difficult for me to establish myself all over again in Hungary now, at the age of 76. My heart aches for my abandoned homeland. I cannot change my heart. The wise old proverb is indeed true: "He who changes homelands should change his heart!"

If I reflect upon everything that has happened, it comforts me to realize that those of us who participated in the 1956 Revolution and Freedom Fight can rightfully say: We did what our country demanded of us. God be with you, Hungary, my dear Motherland.

I don't know how much longer I will be able to hum the old folk song, but I will do it as long as I am alive:

*We left our beautiful country,  
Famous little Hungary,  
Then turned back for just one more look  
And the tears came to our eyes.*

### **Preface and postscript**

It is a difficult task, after 49 years, to talk about the glorious Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Countless writings on this topic have already been published. It is difficult indeed to write or say anything new and worthwhile. As even the fingers of our own hands are unique, so the experiences and tragedies of the individuals who participated in the Revolution are all different from each other. So I can write only that which I saw with my own eyes, that which happened to me and around me, in 1956 and thereafter.

I was just an ordinary participant in the Revolution. I did what was asked of me, as long as I could and as long as I had to.

Each year in October a strange feeling comes over me, and grows stronger as October 23 approaches... I become sad on these October anniversaries, I cry when I think of past events... for decades now I am very often reminded of a beautiful Hungarian folk song, and feel as though I am humming it together with everyone who was with me during the fighting, with whom I had to leave my homeland, who rejoiced in our victory and who died a heroic death by my side, a smile on their faces, for they knew they were giving their lives for the freedom of Hungary.

Now, too, I hear the song in my head... once again, I am there, we are all there, on the streets of Budapest. I am 27 years old and going off to save the lives of Hungarians... then it is all over... it is over, and we have to flee.

Sometimes, at night, tears come to my eyes because I see the fallen warriors, the blood of my comrades, as they die in my arms, smiling in the belief that victory is ours, and their heart beats for the last time.

Then we're off toward the border, we had to leave, we had to come, we had to flee for our lives from the ruthless Red hordes and their servants intent on crushing our freedom with their tanks. Two hundred thousand of us fled to the West.

I ask myself, and many of today's young people ask: How did all this begin? I recall the events in my mind, and I can tell the story.

As with the Treaty of Trianon after the First World War, the Great Powers convened after the Second World War to sentence Hungary, once again, to death and to the loss of its freedom. At first, the Bolsheviks, under the aegis of communism, began their advance using the tactic of two steps forward – one step back. The political show trials began, innocent Hungarian leaders were executed, the best of our citizens were imprisoned on false charges. Cardinal Mindszenty was imprisoned... the sound of the doorbell struck terror into our hearts, as we waited for them to come and get us. The ruthless terror of the Secret Police was decimating the Hungarian nation. And the discontent in the country grew ever greater, for the Hungarian nation has always been – and hopefully will always be – a freedom-loving, God-fearing nation of patriots.

The oppression continued until the nation's patience finally ran out in October 1956. Hungarians old and young participated. In those days, I felt that something would happen, but did not dare believe that it would be a Revolution and fight for freedom.

I remember it as if it were happening today. On October 23, I was on my way home from work...

***Károly Oláh***

*After fleeing Hungary, Károly Oláh lived for a few years in Austria, then immigrated to the United States and settled in New Jersey, in 1959. At Rutgers University he worked as an engineer, then – after retirement – completed a degree in Theology. Since 2000, Oláh has been a minister of the Hungarian Presbyterian Church in Wharton, New Jersey.*