

## Levente Koller

### '56 Through the Eyes of a Youngster

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*"Star fell, the earth shook, came the year of miracles..." – János Arany*

*January 1956 Budapest was shaken by an earthquake.*

*In October 1956 the whole world was...!*

#### **Distant and immediate antecedents**

My Father obtained his high school and later his medical diploma by studying under the electric streetlights in Kőbánya. He was born into the family of an ironworker and had seven brothers and sisters.

In 1942, Dr. Louis Koller, adjunct professor of dermatology, changed his employment from St. Steven's Hospital to the clinic at the City Police Headquarters in Budapest. On the day of the proclamation he dissuaded his guests, Ágnes Sz. and her husband 'Uncle' Imre from leaving. For good reason. They remained in hiding in the shaded 'servant's room.' Later on he allowed the members – wanted by the police – of the Hungarian Revisionist League to meet in secret at our apartment in Práter Street. This was the last meeting of the League.

After the war, during the short lived era of democracy, he visited the Prime Minister, Ferenc Nagy, with a delegation of senior police officers, in order to convince the Prime Minister to oppose a proposed law, supported by the Interior Ministry, that would have permitted the discharging of unlimited numbers of senior police officers in order to fill the ranks with newly promoted, communist sympathizers.

While Ferenc Nagy's attitude was: "don't worry," the Prime Minister was soon traveling toward exile in the United States. They were left in the Rákosi era. My Father said: "Roosevelt replaced the black plague with the Asian cholera."

He was taken away twice by agents of the ÁVH despite the fact, that by this time he had to wear the uniform of the police.

The BBC, Voice of America and Radio Free Europe, broadcasting on the 13, 16, 19, 41, and 49 short wave frequencies kept the faith in those believing in democracy.

I could not say a word about this to anyone, even though I was only five years old.

Nor could I tell anybody about Scola Benedictina, the chorus of Father Alfonz at St. Joseph's Church in Józsefváros.

In about 1952, Stalin started to have his doctors beaten, because they could not make the old mass murderer young again. The leaders of the communist party were in panic in Budapest. In early 1953, they promoted the Roman Catholic, non-party member doctor from a working class family background, to the rank of lieutenant colonel; this promotion required the approval of the Council of Ministers. (The problem faced by the Interior Ministry was that they had no other doctor with a working class background in police uniform in the whole country. Despite these facts: "After he educates the new generation of police doctors, he should be fired;" I read this conclusion on his evaluation in 1957.)

My Father smiled about this and became a "comrade" despite his ideals.

He helped those arrested for political reasons by tampering with their blood samples by passing a piece of cotton soaked in pure alcohol over the vial of blood taken. If the lab determined the prisoner was a drunk,

they would usually get away without a long prison sentence, which was quite different from the fate of political prisoners.

He studied throughout his life. He acquired his medical diploma with a teaching certificate, specialized in dermatology, VD, and later forensic medicine. The last specialty he acquired was dentistry.

At Police Headquarters he was on duty for 24 hours and off for 48. On October 23, he was working in his recently opened dental office in Ráckeve.

We heard about the events in Poznan from western radio broadcasts.

We really did not care about personnel changes within the communist government or alterations in the "5 Year Plans." The general opinion among our friends and relatives was that only war could end this rotten regime.

I had no idea about the goings on within the Writer's Union, the universities, or other similar political developments.

### **October 23, Tuesday**

I was involved with the preparation of a book report about Mór Jókai's *"Stonehearted Man and His Sons."* The next day I had to give the very first presentation in the eighth grade.

After school I started to take notes immediately. Radio Kossuth provided the usual programs as background music. I suddenly realized, that the scheduled program stopped and the announcer was talking about denial or permission for some demonstration in the afternoon.

Radio Kossuth halted the program later and brought up the subject again with contradictory information about the demonstration. It reported that the Interior Minister had actually revoked the permit etc.

Unease and excitement came over me. What is this? What is happening? What is a demonstration? I continued writing but I could not fall back into the usual homework preparation mode.

Later on, one of our neighbors showed up. Since there were only two telephones in the apartment building, many people used ours. The teacher was called by her husband, the writer, and they were discussing the exciting ongoing events.

We realized after a while that Radio Kossuth was filling our head with propaganda and lies. Their "news" about marshal law, cornered anti-revolutionary groups and criminal gangs increased our concern and insecurity. Everyone started to get nervous. And my Father had to be at his office in Ráckeve! At this time!

In the evening the writer called back again from the statue of Stalin. I heard about dangerous, exciting, unbelievable, things! They were going to tear down the statue??!!

The agitation became louder on the street and also in our home.

On the street small groups of people were talking everywhere. Práter Street was filled with noise. The tension was close to sparking.

It was getting dark when we heard shots and machine gun rattle from a great distance.

The tenants using our telephone advised their loved ones with the greatest concern, to be careful and head home immediately.

My Father arrived home late from the train. Almost as soon as he stepped in the door a uniformed policeman handed him a written order addressed to him. He was to report to Headquarters immediately, there were numerous casualties.

### **October 24, Wednesday**

We woke up to a great explosion on Wednesday morning. It was early, I started to get ready for school.

The phone rang. It was my Father. He said that there was street fighting and no one should leave home. There was no reason to become a casualty from bullets or shrapnel.

The weather was pleasant, so we opened the windows. The street was full of people. We could hear everything from our second floor window. They were discussing the events while the distant sounds of fighting provided background noise. Most of the sounds came from the direction of the intersection of Üllői Avenue and the Körút (Circle Avenue). Most were rifle and automatic small arms fire but greater explosions could also be heard.

Around ten a great explosion was heard. Suddenly I saw something fall down into the middle of the street, among the people. My friend Ernő brought it up to the apartment. I was holding shrapnel from a heavy artillery or mortar round in my hands.

From Kossuth Radio, among the unsettling propaganda “news,” gunfire and explosions could also be heard.

It is difficult to remember the exact time we heard this, but at one point Free Kossuth Radio announced: “We have been lying to you day and night...” This was something memorable! Maybe the uprising had been victorious? However, we still heard lots of shooting from the direction of Corvin Circle.

During the day, a huge mass of people marched through Nagytemplom (Big Church) Street and Práter Street. Everyone was filled with enthusiasm. Being truly liberated was a miraculous, wonderful feeling! On this day, people placed flags on their houses after they cut out the Rákosi emblem with scissors.

Due to the sounds of street fighting people started to prepare. We collected water in the tub.

On this and other days young people with arms came to visit Mr. B., their retired teacher. Other times they walked through the apartments, looking for positions from which they could fire.

We were very concerned for the victory of the Revolution!

Our telephone was still utilized from time to time by the tenants. There was lots of news and rumors swirling around, but we knew, we were free at last! It was an intoxicating feeling!

The street was active all day, every day. Every piece of news had to be discussed, whether it was true or not. From the direction of the fighting I was certain not to be able to see the inside of my school for a long time.

### **October 25, Thursday**

I recall a cloudy day, and the feeling of complete vulnerability. The street was active but people were in line at a small store across the street since early morning. Mid-morning suddenly the people hurriedly went into the entranceways of apartment houses. Soon everyone disappeared. The street became empty. The roar of truck engines filled Práter Street from the direction of Illés Street.

My God, maybe the Russians were coming?

Soon two truckloads of helmeted “green ÁVO”– internal security and boarder guards – passed under our windows. They carried rifles with bayonets. They were watching the windows. They passed through the intersection of Nagytemplom Street and drove toward Futó Street. After this we could no longer see them, as the protrusion from our house obstructed our vision.

A minute later a long barrage of submachine gun fire could be heard. We all hit the deck. Long return fire was the response from the trucks. Later I heard they turned into Futó Street and took off in the direction of Baross Avenue. It seemed they had no desire to advance any closer to Corvin Circle. Understandable. We were happy from the bottom of our hearts.

All the stucco was missing from the apartment house on the corner of Futó Street.

After this, we removed the inner set of windows, hid them behind the wardrobes, and started to carry our belongings to the cellar.

If I recall correctly, the radio reported that Prime Minister Hegedűs called on the Soviet Union for assistance under the Warsaw Pact agreement. Our emotions hit bottom. We knew all was lost, maybe by evening.

Maybe it was early afternoon when a few unshaven individuals, carrying submachine guns and wearing Russian heavy jackets and caps, taking cover in doorways, slowly went along the length of Práter street from the direction of Illés street. They were advancing toward Corvin Alley. Maybe there were five of them?

As they arrived at the Nagytéplom Street corner, they seemed undecided. One started in one direction, the other in another direction. Finally they huddled in a doorway and waited.

We just watched from behind the curtains and were excited. What would come next? We were concerned that these agents would take over the area. What was going to happen to the revolutionaries?

Suddenly they stepped out to the street and started running back where they came from. A huge unarmed throng arrived from all directions and gave chase to the Russian jacketed group.

Where did this crowd arrive from? Who called them? How did they know where the enemy was hidden?

I heard much later that one of them was thrown out a window on Papp Square.

My Mother went out for bread and met my Godfather. They were talking in line when bullets hit the wall above them. They hurried home right away.

During the afternoon people started walking toward Köztársaság (Republic) Square. We heard about some happenings at Köztársaság Square amid heavy weapon reports. Lacking any details we did not know at that time what was going on. Later we gathered from lots of confused rumors that the party building was under siege and the fight was over.

Large crowds walked through our streets again.

We removed the curtains and carpets by evening, because we wanted to fireproof our apartment as much as possible. Small suitcases were waiting at the door for each member of the family, in case we had to run down to the cellar. There were some who felt it was safer to sleep in the entry hallway.

### **October 26, Friday**

It must have been a nice day because we were watching the long line in front of the store through open windows. I did not know what could still be purchased in that small shop. The street had traffic, it was filled with passers-by and groups talking. Occasionally a truck roared toward Corvin Circle with bloody sheets covering the back. It was unpleasant to watch. We knew some poor casualties were being transported to the clinic.

The preparations went well. All of the grown-ups remembered their duties from the war. The cooperation was also exemplary. Everyone knew, even the children, that these were very serious events.

Although we had not seen it yet, we heard that a couple of armored vehicles had also been destroyed at the intersection of Üllői Avenue and Nagykörút. The unique configuration of Corvin Circle provided an excellent defensive base. We heard something about some Hungarian armored units fighting alongside freedom fighters around the Kilián Barracks. The explanation from the street was that "they changed sides."

Our second floor neighbor invited us over to take a look down into Nagytéplom Street from their apartment. At the edge of the sidewalk, glass bottles were lined up in a row. Someone was pouring gasoline through a funnel into the Molotov cocktails from a metal can. Young people in a great hurry carried pairs of these newly manufactured anti-armor weapons under their arms to the "front."

We observed scenes where a young person brought two rifles from somewhere. He left one leaning against the wall and continued walking toward Corvin Circle. Within minutes someone picked it up and followed him. Who said this was not the people's revolt?

Late morning, while we were leaning out our windows, a great roar was heard from the upper end of Práter Street. The deep sound could also be felt as a vibration in our legs. The line disappeared from the store in seconds. The street became empty very quickly. The roar got stronger very quickly, maybe a few shots or automatic weapon fire could be heard. We caught on almost simultaneously: TANKS! Run to the CELLAR!

I ran to the hallway, grabbing my coat and suitcase. The door was already open; from our apartment everyone was running to the staircase. I must have been among the last, I ran alone down the stairs, through the courtyard, when the tank fired its cannon in front of our house.

The power of the sound was felt not only by me but also by all windows facing the street. After the deafening noise I could hear the continuous breaking of glass for quite some time.

At this time I arrived at the cellar entrance and ran down the steep stairs. Everyone was there already. The noise of the weapons intertwined and created a scary cacophony.

As I stood there with my back against the wall, I knew what was happening was not a game.

As the time passed, the fighting continued, and smoke and dust came in through the cellar windows filling every nook and cranny. We did not have time for hunger, thirst or even fear. We were afraid and prayed for our young fighters.

Nobody left the cellar for hours even after the battle was over. From a distance we heard shots, automatic fire, and explosions all afternoon.

Finally, in late afternoon Mr. B. appeared. He was the only one who watched the whole battle from his fourth story apartment. After this everyone questioned him. But he had stayed because he was curious about his student's bravery and success. He wanted to see it first hand.

This time some tried their luck and went upstairs to their apartments. It was getting dark when my Mother and sister went upstairs. They came down with the news that all our windows are shattered. They could look out and see wreckage at the Futó street corner. Some of it was still burning.

I went upstairs. As I entered the darkness it surprised me that all my steps could be heard reverberating. I was walking on broken glass, and it was certainly noisy. I was stepping on our broken windows and it echoed through Práter Street.

I leaned out into the darkness. I did not see flames but a smoking mound of wrecks blocked Práter Street at the Futó intersection.

We had supper in our kitchen but after all this, many elected to spend the night in the cellar. We slept there also with all the children from the building.

### **October 27, Saturday**

We awoke in the wash room in the cellar. Since we did not hear any more shooting, we went upstairs to our apartment on the second floor. I examined the bullet holes on the ceiling caused by shots from below. I located the fragments of these projectiles. With lots of effort we swept up the broken glass. As far as it was possible, we removed the shards of glass from the window frames also.

A crowd of people was swarming throughout the streets.

Since we were curious about the wrecks at Futó Street, we went down to look around. We approached the scene of combat slowly. The blackened mass of wrecks appeared confusing at first but later they started to take shape. Among the distorted, burned wreckage of four trucks and two towed artillery pieces, we could also see numerous bodies of Russian soldiers. Most of them were partially burned to ashes. The trucks were carrying artillery crew and munitions too.

I saw many human remains, blackened skulls in black helmets. It appeared that the flames destroyed mostly the upper torsos, but left the rest of their bodies intact.

We were stepping over the bodies.

The first vehicle of the destroyed column was an armored car. The flames must have been extremely hot, as from its corner the dripping steel formed a metal colored puddle over a foot in diameter. The brown, macaroni like tubes of nitro-cellulose, packaged for the artillery pieces, were strewn all over. We collected some.

Those who saw it said the column was led by two tanks. As soon as they passed the intersection of Práter and Futó Streets they came under fire. Whatever happened to them I do not know. After the battle, the freedom fighters allegedly towed two functioning artillery pieces to Corvin Circle.

Lots of unlucky young Russians had to die there for the Soviet Empire.

This was a sad scene, but we realized the freedom fighters had won.

The amateur infantry defeated the armor and artillery of a great power. Maybe communism can be defeated after all?

After returning to our apartment we did not reposition the hidden windows. Instead, we covered the frames with brown craft paper. The apartment became livable again.

We were not assured that we wouldn't have to run to the cellar again. It was better to wait.

### **October 28, Sunday**

The Revolution was victorious! Groups of the patrolling 'National Guard' with red, white and green armbands were walking everywhere. Armed civilians, policemen and soldiers were walking together. The new National Guard!

I am not absolutely sure when, but two wounded Russian soldiers were found at the lumber storage lot on the corner of Práter and Nagytemplom Streets. They were survivors of the battle on Futó Street.

The people helped them onto two bicycles and pushed them on Nagytemplom Street toward Üllői Avenue. The throng followed them and everyone wanted to help push the bicycles. The Kilián Barracks was the goal, so there they could turn the two "prisoners of war" over to the Hungarian soldiers and rebels. Everybody was proud of the humane treatment.

Farmers brought food from the villages and passed it out to the folks. I have never seen anything like this in my life.

Finally my Father came home. He showed us his new National Guard ID.

He told interesting stories about events at the police Headquarters.

He treated many unlucky civilians, casualties of walking about, standing in lines, etc.

Sándor Kopácsi, the Chief of Police took a stand with the revolutionaries. This created tension inside the building between the police and ÁVH (Secret Police). The two upper floors belonged to the ÁVH. The leadership of the police was concerned about an attempted takeover. They positioned wheeled machine guns at each floor, pointing at the elevators, as a preventative measure. There was 24-hour guard. All police personnel slept with their arms at the ready, some on tables. It was discovered days later, that the ÁVH left their uniforms and evaporated from the building.

I went down to the Futó Street combat scene with my Father. We examined it thoroughly.

He suggested that we should go over to Buda, to the apartment of his assistant, because Corvin Circle may become a battle zone again. He requested a car, and we all got into it. His National Guard ID helped us through checkpoints.

After the battles this was the first time that I had seen the intersection of Üllői Avenue and Nagykörút (Grand Circle Road). It was unrecognizable. The exploded tanks, wrecks, and damaged buildings showed the results of heavy combat. Russian dead were all over. It was horrible.

Being stopped by the National Guard was a special feeling. They did not represent the oppressive regime, but the liberated people. The free Hungarian people! Finally!

We spent less than a week in Buda. By the time we returned to Józsefváros, I no longer saw dead bodies. Just the ruins. But there was peace. A new Hungarian government led the country, and we were hopeful that all would go well from that point on.

To our dismay the good news was quickly replaced by bad.

My Father became very upset when Radio Free Europe read the content of a telegram from President Eisenhower to Tito of Yugoslavia. According to him, everything was over. Eisenhower's words almost goaded the Soviet Union into action against the new Hungarian government.

It was the 3rd of November when we slept in our apartment with brown paper windows for the very first time since the fighting began. The small suitcases were still ready at the door. Just in case.

## **November 4, Sunday**

The next morning we were awakened early by a huge explosion. The whole building shook. My Father directed us to get dressed and go to the cellar fast. There were repetitious explosions; we were downstairs in minutes. Soon everybody was down in the cellar. Concern and fear were in the air, as everybody was talking nervously.

At the bottom of the stairs in the small central hallway children were sitting on benches. I started to tell them stories.

The detonations were coming more frequently. Those with war experience opined: this was heavy artillery.

Mr. B. was in the cellar also. Suddenly two young fighters appeared. Did they need something? I did not know. The tenants only cared about their safety.

As the frequency of the explosions increased, everybody quieted down. Some were praying. I had to stop my storytelling since every word was punctuated by detonations. My Father directed the family to a protected corner.

The roof tiles were falling. Sometimes the impacts seemed to have metallic noise. The ruins were crumbling down. Dust and the smoke from the explosives filled the air.

A few people became pale. Some were shaking their heads. Nobody spoke. We were all praying. We endured the heavy artillery barrage for hours.

Finally the explosions started coming less frequently. The clanging of tank tracks and clouds of exhaust gases filled the hallways underground. This lasted for hours.

Russian soldiers came into the courtyard and two of them came down the stairs, looked over the people, then retreated up the stairs and out of the building. There was one person, a member of a uniformed tenant's family, who appeared to be glad to see the Russians.

Somebody turned on a radio. You could hear every word of the cry for help. The tenants started to talk about the United Nations. They must be coming soon!

My Father noted: "Do not believe it. Nobody is going to come." As if lightning struck, I realized the communists were going to be back.

We spent the night of November 4th in the cellar. And the 5th, and many more days after that. After the 5th we did not hear any more shooting. We realized the resistance had ended along with our sunny days of freedom.

## **Epilogue**

When we went up to our apartment to look out our paperless windows, we saw Soviet tanks positioned at the corner of Nagytemplom and Práter Streets. They also stood at other intersections for weeks.

At Tom Street, close to Nagytemplom, there was a crater so large and deep, that the sewer was flowing at the bottom. This must have been caused by a bomb from an aircraft.

The windows that we saved were repositioned in the frames. We knew a dark era was coming. The news was sad. Tens of thousands immigrated to Austria. Their messages were broadcast by Radio Free Europe. My Father was talking about our country "bleeding to death."

My Mother crossed the border on her birthday, December 10th, with my sister and brother. The plan was that we would follow them after they arrived at her sister's place in the United States.

Deep down, I knew it would never happen.

Sometime later there was a silent protest called. There was no one in the streets. Nobody. For hours. This was a unified nation's last breath.

There was marshal law and a curfew. My cousin was arrested. A strike was also called.

The wrecks on the street were removed, along with the unexploded giant mortar round lying in the hallway in our apartment building.



Students from Práter Elementary were sent to other schools. We burned our Russian language books. We received Swedish aid breakfast. Hot chocolate with an excellent bun and meat spread.

By spring, my Father requested retirement. He was successful.

During the time of “MUK” – Márciusban Újra Kezdzük (“We will restart in March”) the rooftops were full of pre-positioned snipers. It was unnecessary. By that time Kádár was orchestrating the “New Patriotism” and the fight against the “counter-revolution.”

My Father’s friend was fired from his job because the workers had elected him to the Worker’s Council. He was an older person who could not find another job. He lived in poverty even after retirement.

I started high school after the Revolution. An acquaintance of mine, a youngster named Antal, committed suicide. God forgive him.

The KISZ (Communist Youth League) was created. Only two students joined the ranks from our class. One of them came from a (communist) “party line” family who were true believers of Komszomol; the other is a film producer in the United States.

B. Zoltán, a young priest, was convicted for spying in 1958, for sending newspaper articles to his friend in Rome. Working with young people became very dangerous for everyone not connected to the Communist Youth League. We were living in dark times.

A number of students joined KISZ during the third (junior) year of high school. One of my classmates, who vacillated about whether to join or not, finally joined KISZ. He committed suicide later. God bless his soul.

By the time of graduation only two of us were not members of the “party.”

At the end of high school, before we parted ways, some of us promised that we would never forget the sad events of our history, the lost provinces and our quest for freedom.

After this, nobody spoke about the events of 1956, politics, or “Hungarian fate,” other than my family and friends.

Kádár was working on the plans for “gulyás communism,” while strenuously emphasizing the need to fight against the “counter-revolution” and its crimes.

Among themselves, people only discussed financial issues and sports.

Ramos’s “proselytization” with rubber truncheons, was gradually replaced by a much more insidious “lightening,” based on self-censorship, public “confessions” and “repentance.”

The nation was forced to endure a complete, penetrating, all-inclusive, “brain-wash” and “hallucinogenic drug treatment” lasting for decades. The underpinning of this “therapy” was improvement in the standard of living. Based on foreign loans.

With systematic lies, or even worse, half-truths, they achieved a total corruption of the nation’s soul. Hungarians were ensured a new refrigerator or a Trabant 23 by having abortions.

Balkanization inside and outside. We had to feel gratitude for the smallest easement of the oppression, based on the idea: thank them for not beating you.

The propaganda from the Kádár regime ruled.

The heroic Revolution of 1956 became a non-event for the masses. During my college years I never heard a word about that subject. Slowly a revision of history was written; nobody cared about that either.

Why should the nation remember such a painful event? We had too many already.

We were living in the “we just have to forget” era.

In 1963, the young priest, B. Zoltán was released. His hair turned white.



In 1964, I received a passport, miraculously, to visit the New York World's Fair and my Mother.

My Father passed away in 1977. Maybe three hundred paid their respects. God bless his soul!

He said something during the heavy artillery barrage that resonated in me for decades: "Hungary has written her name into history."

"We did not forget the heroic young freedom fighters of Budapest."

### ***Levente Koller***

*I was born in Budapest in 1943. My Father was a physician. I began my schooling at the Práter Street school, where I was an eighth grader in 1956. We spent the days of the Revolution in our Práter Street apartment. In 1957, my Mother with two of my siblings arrived at the home of her sister in the United States.*

*After finishing Vörösmarty High School, I continued my studies at the Eötvös Loránd University of Science.*

*Since 1964, I have also lived in the United States. I was drafted and served for two years in the U.S. Army.*

*I continued my professional studies at New York University. During my whole career I worked as a plastics researcher. I was named laboratory director, and served on the board of the Society of Plastics Engineers and the Society for the Advancement of Material Process Engineering. My name can be found on chapters of technical books, as well as on several patents.*

*I retired in 2003, but continue to work on patent submissions.*

*Presently I serve on the Board of the Hungarian Communion of Friends.*