

Sandor T. Halász

What should have happened 11 years ago...

Summer

During the summer of 1956, a Budapest streetcar conductor whose living conditions had been startlingly primitive even by those current-day standards - he lived in a one-room pantry cottage with several children - broke open a store that had been unoccupied for several years, but at least had running water and a washroom, and moved in with his family.

The Communist authorities allowed them three days to vacate the store, otherwise they would be removed by the police. The deadline passed, and when the conductor did not move, the police came to carry out their task. However, they were greeted by more than one hundred conductors standing in front of the building who let them know that they would have to count on the resistance of the conductors. After consulting their superior officers, the police withdrew and our streetcar conductor and his family were free to enjoy their new living quarters.

This was how the Hungarian workers learned they had power. The opportunity to use this power came soon enough.

At the Steel Mill

On October 23, 1956, I had to visit a large steel mill in the east of Hungary for a consultation. The train was slow, so I arrived at around noon at the factory. There was unusual silence because no one was working. The workers were instead sitting around their machines. They were on strike, the first in 25 years.

The party bosses tried to persuade the men to pretend to work or at the very least to stop playing cards. I could not do my job either, so I took the evening train back to Budapest. There was no sign of disturbance on the train and I ate a nice meal in the dining car. I still remember how good the beef soup was. At around 10 PM the train reached the Eastern Railroad Station. The general atmosphere in the rail hall was somewhat unusual as there were crowds of people milling around despite the late hour. There was also a strange smell in the air - fog and perhaps gunpowder? Some three or four trucks rolled by loaded with young men who chanted, "Russians, Go Home!" The air was now heavy and guns crackled in the distance. At the bus stop a crowd of perhaps one hundred people waited for the bus.

I asked, "What happened here?"

"What should have happened 11 years ago!"

This was quite clear. I was quite tired, however, and wanted to get home. But how? The only possible way was to walk 3 miles, so I started out on foot. On the way home, I heard some small arms fire in the background and saw a crowd besiege the building of the chief communist daily newspaper - what an incredible sight! I also passed a military barracks and saw Hungarian soldiers throwing weapons out the windows for the Revolutionaries. The rest of the walk home was uneventful. In the Buda district, the trams were even running. I found my family in good health.

The next morning, I hastened to my workplace where the discussion centered on the events of the previous day. A meeting of all employees was called by the newly formed "workers" council. The modern reader probably cannot appreciate how volatile the situation was at the time, and that the whole question of whether there would be a Revolution or other serious developments was still in doubt.

It was announced that an emissary of the Hungarian Labor Party (Communist Party) would also be present at the meeting and planned to address the people assembled.

“Question even before the Labor Party delegate speaks,” a colleague of mine got up. He was a short, little man who walked with a cane. Most of us did not even know his name. “I am pleased that the Labor Party delegate is here. I hope he will explain what I have been wondering about for the past 11 years. Who does the Hungarian Labor Party really represent?”

All hell broke loose. Everybody rushed to shake hands with the unknown speaker. He was one of the few real heroes whom I personally met in my lifetime.

The Labor Party delegate made a hasty exit through the back door. Somebody started to recite the Lord's Prayer.

And so it began.

Sándor T. Halász

Finishing his studies in Budapest in 1949, he worked as a mechanical engineer until the events of 1956. After fleeing his homeland in 1957, he eventually settled near New York. He earned a Masters degree in Engineering from Columbia University and was Chair of the Department of Technology at the City College of the City University of New York until his retirement. He and his wife (see also her submission in Hungarian) currently live in New Jersey.