

Tamás Rátoni Nagy

I Fought Them in Vietnam, Because I Was Too Young in Budapest

My Father tried to escape to the West through the Iron Curtain in 1950, but he was shot on the Austrian border. After treatment in the hospital, the ÁVO (Secret Police) put him in solitary confinement in a narrow cell with ice water dripping down all four walls, where he was forced to stand with his feet in cold water for 72 hours. All of this was done without food, of course, which culminated in him signing a forced confession about crimes against the people. He received a prison sentence of 3-1/2 years and spent part of his incarceration in Szombathely and at a forced-labor sawmill. He escaped, however, along with seven prisonmates, and went into hiding. During the ÁVO's monthly visits, they would hit my Mother and me and ask my Father's whereabouts. At that time I did not know that he was hiding in our furniture store. Later, after our store was seized by the state, he came home one night and I finally saw him. Afterwards, my family tried to tell me that I had dreamt it, but I didn't believe them, and finally they had to explain that he was, in fact, at home.

I learned to alert my Father when I was coming home with someone by rattling the keys on the stairway railing, so he could return to his hiding space. Of course, I was not allowed to tell anyone that he was home.

We lived in an apartment building in Budafok, and my Father tried to work during the day making furniture, working quietly using his hand tools. Later he turned himself in to the police, served the remainder of his 3 1/2 year prison sentence, and was freed the summer of 1956.

During this time, I can clearly remember my Mother decorating an Easter egg with a traditional Hungarian motif instead of with a hammer and sickle or a red star. In school, however, I had to say I received an Easter egg with a red star. So early on I was taught to lie, because if I hadn't, they might have arrested my Mother.

October 1956

During the Revolution, my Father fought in Pest at the ÁVO Barracks. Later, when the Soviets returned in November, he organized his former gymnastics students from Budafok and fought in the outskirts of Budafok and Kamara forest.

I was a youngster and could not really do much fighting, but one day I decided I could protest against the mandatory Russian taught in schools from fifth grade on. So I hand-printed some fliers and posted them on the doors of the school. That was my contribution to the freedom fight.

Another distinct memory I have is when the Soviet tanks returned on November 4th. My Mother sent me to stand in line for bread, and as I stepped outside the gate, I felt the earth tremble beneath my feet. I looked up and saw a Soviet tank coming down our street. My feet froze in fear, and I could not move. Luckily, the Russian had enough humanity to go in another direction, turning off of our street. This incident was the scariest yet for me.

Another memory I have is when the Soviets were shelling from the banks of the Danube. We could hear the shells whistling through the air above us in Budafok. People were talking about shrapnel raining down, and I remember being in the basement with my Mother and being scared that something like that might hit me. My Father was not with us because he was off fighting somewhere. He had to leave Budafok, because his name was the first on the list to get hanged if caught. Later I learned that he left Hungary through Yugoslavia because of his earlier experience in 1950 at the Austrian border. My Mother and I left 2-3 weeks later than my Father, riding on a milk truck from the Keleti train station. Getting to the train station, my last memories of Budapest were of Soviet tanks on street corners, and streetcar tracks mangled by tank treads on the Móricz Zsigmond square. The fighting had mostly subsided by then.

A milk-truck driver from Sopron took us to the Austrian border, and an old man guided us across. My last memory of Hungary was seeing a dry flower sticking up through the 20 cm deep snow. I leaned over and plucked it, and to this day I still have it pressed between the pages of my journal. As I looked back toward my homeland and left it forever, it was as though a twenty-ton boulder had fallen from my shoulders; it was as if the cruelty of communism and the hardships it had caused my family had just been released.

I have yet to return to Hungary.

We arrived in Camp Kilmer on March 28, 1957, and I spent my eleventh birthday there. We came by train to Cleveland, and I remember remarking how much empty land and open space there was between New Jersey and Ohio.

Vietnam

My parents had divorced, so I grew up without a Father. Things were pretty tough financially, and since I was rather wild and unruly, and I needed some discipline, I enlisted in the Marine Corps. After completing basic training, I met up with a Hungarian friend, Joe Dezső, and ended up in the same battalion at Camp Pendleton.

Our unit was sent to Vietnam in May of 1965. Crossing the Pacific Ocean, Joe and I, two Hungarian kids, had a conversation on the ship. Our discussion centered on going to Vietnam and how it was an opportunity to return the slap in the face the communists had given us in Hungary in 1956. We were not fighting against the Soviets, to be sure, but they were communists nonetheless. So we went willingly to Vietnam. I spent 13 months there, then came back and served the remainder of the military tour training Marine officers, FBI, and Secret Service members how to shoot on the rifle range at Quantico, VA. After I left the Marine Corps, I returned to Cleveland.

The significance of 1956

The 1956 Revolution personally gave me a chance to start a new life in America. From a world perspective, however, what caused this tiny nation to rise up against the Soviet superpower, armed to the teeth? We Hungarians were lucky if we had a 22 or an air gun, against their tanks. Yet the people still rebelled. We had had enough, and this freedom fight was the first crack in the armor of the great Soviet Union, precisely because it was not an ordinary riot. The people who rebelled were the factory workers from the industrial areas, those same people who were glorified in the communist worker propaganda. Our freedom fight stopped the communist movements in Italy and France dead in their tracks, because it revealed the true nature of communism. And later, in 1989, when Hungary opened its borders to the West, that brought down the Berlin Wall, because East Germans went to freedom through Hungary.

I spent most of my life in Cleveland. One important thing about the Hungarian émigré community is that they continued to commemorate the events of 1956, even when it was forbidden to do so in Hungary, from 1956 to 1989. But now things have changed: on October 23, 1989, a free Hungary was proclaimed a republic, so that date is now doubly etched in Hungarian history.

I owe thanks to Hungary for giving me life, and I owe thanks to the United States, my new country, for allowing me to start over and live a life of freedom and prosperity. I am now an American citizen and live my life in America, but my heart remains first and foremost Hungarian, and will always be so.

Tamás Rátoni Nagy

Tamás Rátoni Nagy was 10 years old when he experienced the events of the freedom fight and fled to the West with his Mother. A veteran of the United States Marine Corps and of the Vietnam War, he returned to Cleveland and worked in the art framing and industrial drafting fields. Nagy is an avid Boy Scout leader in Troop 414, and also volunteers in the Cleveland Hungarian School on Monday evenings. He is currently employed as a construction inspector.