

Tibor Arany

An Original “Pesti Srác”

In 1952, Tibor Arany was drafted into the Hungarian military. He later attended the officer training academy in the city of Pécs. On charges of refusing to obey orders and insubordination he was condemned to forced labor in 1953. On August 23, 1953, he was set free due to the amnesty announced by Imre Nagy. Following his release, he was sent to the town of Székesfehérvár, then to the military training camp at Böhönye, where he participated in war games observed by high government officials. When he completed the games “with distinction,” he was rewarded with three volumes of *“The Complete Writings of Mátyás Rákosi.”*

The day after the government officials left the military camp, Arany’s unit was involved in an assault rifle battle and explosion during training exercises. Six soldiers were seriously injured, among them Arany. Hit by pieces of shrapnel under his nose, as well as a blast of air pressure, Arany was rendered temporarily deaf. He was also bleeding from the mouth, which led him to assume he had injured his lung.

To top it off, as the Russian and Hungarian officer corps looked on, it became clear that neither an ambulance nor a doctor was on hand for the training exercises – an oversight for which the military did not take responsibility, either then or later on.

The wounded were finally loaded onto a truck, but by the time they reached the hospital at Kaposvár, one seriously injured lieutenant was already dead, and the rest of the injured were in critical condition. To this day, Arany does not know what became of the others, since he was taken to a separate facility, where he received a week’s worth of treatment. When he was returned to the military camp hospital, the officer in charge tried to get Arany to agree never to talk to anyone about the circumstances of the accident. The officer threatened that if he did, he would go back to prison.

On November 11, 1953 – with unusual speed – Arany was sent to forced labor detail at a mine near the town of Pécs. His official record stated that he would have been a “poor influence” on his fellow soldiers. On January 14, 1954, he was released from the mine for medical reasons and returned to Budapest, where he was required to report to the police station on a weekly basis. He later learned that the Hungarian army newspaper reported that accidents involving snake bites had occurred at the Böhönye military camp, but there was no mention of the seriousness of the injuries or of the death. Arany never received any compensation for his suffering and persecution.

Revolution erupts

When the 1956 Revolution and freedom fight erupted, Arany was working at the Laboratory Equipment Factory, where he manufactured thermometers. He participated in the revolutionary events as one of the legendary “Pesti Srácok” [Budapest Boys], and took part in the battles against the invading Soviet military forces, at the very heart of the freedom fight at Corvin Square.

On October 25, Arany attempted to go to his workplace on Tűzoltó Street to see what was happening. When he reached the main intersection of Üllői Street, he saw two T-34 Russian tanks speeding toward Kálvin Square, then turn around and begin slowly inching their way back toward the Kilián Barracks. It was clear that major clashes were imminent. Arany stood at the Museum of Applied Arts, inside the fence, when the two tanks reached the intersection. The first tank stopped halfway up on the curb, with its caterpillar tread in a rather precarious position; the second tank stopped just behind it and to the left, giving some cover to the first one. Across the street, at the second floor balcony of the Kilián Barracks, the soldiers built a fortified shooting station with drum-fed machine guns.

Since street repairs were underway nearby, the paving had been removed and the macadam stones piled up in piles about one meter high. The first tank started firing at a building on a corner of the boulevard, and everyone in the area took cover. When there was a moment's lull, Arany together with a friend, jumped in behind one of the piles of macadam. From the barracks, the soldiers began firing phosphorescent bullets at the tank's tracks and wheels. There were bitumen blocks piled up behind the macadam barricade, which Arany began to throw at the tank's rear wheels. Throwing from a prone position was difficult, but even staying behind the barricade was difficult. His friend suffered a thigh wound because his leg could be seen from behind the tank. Arany was able to quickly tie off the injured leg using his belt.

Meanwhile the fighting continued. The first tank fired twice, causing the machine gun fire from the barracks to cease for a few minutes. When another soldier took over and continued firing from the window, the first tank began to move away, but its tracks slipped. Arany tossed about ten more bitumen blocks at the tank, which began to emit smoke. When the second tank came forward and fired twice more, the balcony of the barracks came crashing down. The two tank drivers must have been communicating with each other, because shortly thereafter, the second tank – firing from all sides – left the area. The next act of the drama ensued.

The remaining tank personnel may have been overcome by smoke because the tank's emergency exit opened, and one of the soldiers inside waved a white cloth from the end of the gun barrel. Arany approached the tank, yelling out "Don't shoot!" and escorted the soldier into Corvin Square. He heard later that the soldier, who was originally from the Carpathians, became a cook for the Hungarian freedom fighters based at Corvin Square.

During a break in the shooting, the white-capped paramedics transported the wounded to the hospital on Mária Street. Arany and his comrades removed the machine gun from the top of the tank and brought it to the Kilián Barracks. Because several people were killed or wounded as a result of the shooting, the crowd grew wild and started throwing Molotov cocktails at the destroyed tank. This was the first T-34 tank to be destroyed in Budapest. After November 4, the incoming tanks were of the T-54 type... but that's another story.

Guarding the Hungarian Women's Democratic Association building

On October 29, the freedom fighters requested reinforcements to act as guards at the Hungarian Women's Democratic Association building, on Belgrád rakpart (today the headquarters of the Smallholders Party). Since Arany lived on Molnár Street, he knew the neighborhood well, and so he was sent together with another young man. They organized guard duty in Szerb Street together with an armed fighter recruited from the nearby military institute. One guard was always on duty to screen anyone who tried to enter the offices of the Writers' Association, headed by Péter Kucka.

The caretaker showed them the building, the basement, the kitchen, and the emergency exit, which opened onto Molnár Street. This was the day that the Secret Police, sensing that the game was up for the system they served, began disguising themselves and trying to escape. There was a boat landing across from the building. That night, Arany sent one of the boys there to keep watch on the street and to signal if any armed units approached. Meanwhile, Arany twice delivered messages to Tibor Déry at the Kecskeméti street college, which was Déry's headquarters – possibly also the headquarters for military studies.

At around 11 p.m., the guard signaled that uniformed units, in a rather strange formation about 10 meters apart, were approaching from the direction of the Erzsébet Bridge. Arany went to the gate of the building, called the guard in, and they waited. They opened one wing of the gate and prepared the machine gun.

The uniformed men slowly approached the gate. When the first one came near enough, Arany and his partner stepped out and yanked the soldiers in one after the other – all five of them – and quickly disarmed them. There were two officers and three privates, all members of the Secret Police. Upon questioning, Arany learned that these soldiers had been defending the Party Committee building in the Fourth district; only one of them, the higher-ranked officer, was armed. The entire unit was from the region of Kalocsa, Hungary. Kucka was very upset when he saw the captured Secret Police: "I never ordered anyone to capture Secret Police; now what are we going to do with them?"

Arany suggested they bring the captives in to Sándor Kopácsi the next morning, at the Police Headquarters at Deák tér. Kucka could not decide, so someone suggested they ask Tibor Déry for advice. But who would go out to Déry now, at night, when the city was full of Secret Police and Russians? Everyone looked at Arany, who had been to see Déry several times. Kucka said: "You did this, it was your idea, and you know Déry."

Arany was able to meet with Déry that night, on the balcony under the cover of night. They agreed that they would provide the captured agents with shoes and clothes from the university dormitory on Szerb Street, and then let them go free; the judicial system of the victorious Revolution would then bring its verdict if the agents were proved guilty. Meanwhile, Arany wrote down the names and addresses of the captives for himself, but the captured officer also wrote down Arany's data, which explains why, years later, Arany was not allowed to return home to Hungary. Yet something compelled Arany to be cautious, and so he gave his birthplace as Tiszazug instead of Tiszaföldvár – no one but those five captives knew this bit of information.

After the Revolution

After the Revolution was crushed, Arany fled to Vienna, then immigrated to the United States. His first job was in Wilmington, Delaware, as a thermometer maker for Dupont. From there he moved to Philadelphia, and finally settled in New York with his family. For decades, he worked for several Hungarian radio programs in New York.

Currently, he is a board member of the 1956 World Federation and of the 1956 "Pesti Srác" Scholarship Foundation. He has financially supported the education of many college students in Hungary.

In 1982, he finally received a visa to enter Hungary with his family. When he arrived at the Budapest airport, he was immediately steered away from his family and escorted into a separate room. Here the officials told him he was an "undesirable" person. When reading his personal data, they gave Tiszazug as his place of birth. Arany asked where they'd gotten that information, but they did not reply. His family was allowed in, but Arany was arrested in the morning and interrogated as to whom he knew in 1956 and also, in the United States. Arany gave no information, but asked – as an American citizen – to telephone the U.S. Embassy. This request was denied. His then-74 year-old Mother, who had not seen her son for decades was waiting for him at the airport. Upon hearing what happened, she fell ill and had to be taken away by ambulance. The next day, Arany was put on a plane to Amsterdam.

With the end of communist rule and the emergence of a free Hungary, Arany was officially recognized by the Hungarian government for his integrity and contribution to protecting and promoting the memory and spirit of the 1956 Revolution. In 1991, Hungarian President Árpád Göncz awarded him the 1956 Memorial Medal. He is also especially proud of the certificate and decoration awarded to him by the Corvin Square Fraternal Society.

In 2001, he moved home to Hungary. The World Association of Hungarian Freedom Fighters recognized his patriotic works with the "Loyalty to Country" Order of the Cross.

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