

William S. Shepard

Reflections of an American Diplomat

I was in my senior year at Wesleyan University when the Hungarian Revolution broke out. We students were transfixed by the news, and professors who knew about Hungary were in great demand, to give impromptu teaching seminars, years before the “teach-in” became an accepted feature of American academic protest. Feeling powerless to help directly, as we all did, and outraged at the turn taken by events, I organized a Hungarian Relief drive on campus, and sent money to a refugee organization in Vienna. Also, full scholarships and free room and board were arranged for two Hungarian refugee students.

And that began a lifetime’s fascination with Hungary, her people and history. In the Foreign Service, following language training, I was assigned to Budapest as Consul and then Political Officer in 1970-1973, and then served as Hungarian Desk Officer from 1973 to 1975. It was a tumultuous time to live in Budapest. Cardinal Mindszenty was still in residence at the Embassy, and I spoke with him often, accompanying him on his late afternoon walks around the Embassy’s interior courtyard. Later, it was my privilege to offer testimony for his Canonization proceedings. Walking with the Cardinal was an education in Hungarian history and national character. My experiences with the Cardinal are set forth in my memoir, *“Diplomatic Tales.”*

During that period, of course the Hungarian Revolution was officially viewed as a counter-Revolution, and proper research on the heroic sites was impossible. It was afterwards that I returned to Hungary, and completed the research necessary for my book, *“Murder On The Danube,”* which is set against the backdrop of the Revolution, and follows the events as they took place from day to day. I was privileged to meet with experts on the period at the 1956 Historical Institute, and to give a seminar there. Many years later, I felt as privileged to give the annual address on the Hungarian Revolution at the Hungarian Embassy reception in Washington, D.C.

During my research, I discovered some little known facts about 1956. From an officer who served at the then American Legation, I found out that at no time did the Legation ask Washington for permission to give refuge to the Cardinal. Instead, the cable authorizing that refuge came “out of the blue” from Washington. And according to Monsignor Turcsenyi, that morning (November 4) as security deteriorated, the Cardinal had merely asked where a “Western legation” was located. He did not specifically ask for the American Legation. Monsignor Turcsenyi knew that the American Legation was in nearby Szabadság Tér, and steered them both that way.

I also found some little known background to the massacre in Kossuth Square outside Parliament on October 25, 1956, which began with firing from the roof of the Agriculture Building across the square. There had been an explosion near the Széchenyi Rakpart just before that. According to an American eyewitness (the building contained American diplomatic apartments), it was an ordnance charge dropped from the apartment building roof, onto Russian tanks below. This explosion set in motion a sequence of events, resulting in the Kossuth Square massacre.

Nobody knows who dropped the ordnance. It could have been anyone, for “at that point, everyone wanted the Russians out.” An American Marine, G.J. Bolick, tried to get onto the Széchenyi roof, but it was bolted from above. And so we will never know exactly who set off the explosion. But it does seem possible that the initial firing in response may have been directed towards Széchenyi, setting off in turn uncontrolled firing at the gathered crowds in Kossuth Square. We may never know for certain. But this is why my book refers to “gun-fire, or a muffled explosion” before the shooting began at Kossuth Square.

The 1956 Hungarian Revolution was an event of epochal importance, not just as a determining incident of the Cold War, although that was the immediate context. Before 1956, building on its capital as an ally in the fight against Hitler, the Soviet Russian empire could claim some moral legitimacy. After that, such claims were ludicrous. I hope that new generations of those who value freedom will long reflect on the courage shown by ordinary Hungarian citizens during those tumultuous days. My wife and I will be in Budapest for the 50th anniversary, and we look forward to walking the route that began the struggle on October 23rd, 2006.

William S. Shepard

A retired diplomat, William S. Shepard was the Republican nominee for Governor of Maryland in 1990. During his diplomatic career, he served in Singapore, Saigon, Athens, Budapest (as Consul and Political Officer), and retired as Consul General at Bordeaux. A Fulbright grantee and Harvard Law School graduate, he and Mrs. Shepard live in Oxford, Maryland. His novel dealing with the Hungarian Revolution, "Murder On The Danube," and his memoir "Diplomatic Tales," with personal memories of Cardinal Mindszenty, are available from www.amazon.com.