

The Buried Nation

By ADOLPH SCHALK

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Part of the time they were sent to work in a prison camp. My son was able to drop a note, urging contact with his parents, into the baby buggy that a neighboring farm woman happened to push along the prison fence. Several weeks later, Laszlo looked up from the ditch he was digging and saw his father staring at him from the other side of the fence. "Fortunately there happened to be a crude outdoor toilet nearby, which was so constructed that it also served the adjacent side only by a wooden partition. By reaching through the toilet seat, under the partition, father could pass sandwiches and a letter to his half-starved son, which Laszlo hid inside his rubber boots."

"But," continued Asszony Kovacs, "that was only the beginning." She went on to describe the five-year prison sentence served by her husband as far back as 1951 for "disloyalty" (i.e., belonging to a Catholic, anti-Communist discussion group). "It was no wonder that when the time came, we put all our hopes in the Revolution."

"How vividly do I remember the day of terror, that fateful November 4, 1956. For a few brief days we thought we had won the Revolution. Laszlo had gone out to see if he could find some food for the family. For years, we had regarded the family of our country with suspicion, thinking they were cooperating with the regime, and accused them of hoarding and stinginess. How wrong we were! From everywhere they came, thousands of them, with trucks and horse-drawn wagons full of chickens, eggs, potatoes, cabbages, distributing everything right on the street. With his arms loaded, Laszlo rushed home, but I could see trouble written all over his face. Dumping the groceries on the table, he shouted, 'Run, run for your lives! To the basement! The Russians are coming!' He gave me and the others a swift hug and kiss and dashed out to join his unit. I have not seen him since."

"Suddenly we heard the rumbling of tanks—we lived near the bridge then—and within minutes, they started shooting indiscriminately at women and children in the streets, firing into houses. Panicked, we all started for the basement—except father. He screamed, 'No Russian is going to chase me out of my home. I'm staying!' He ran into the bathroom and locked himself in. In vain, we pounded on the door and pleaded with him to come with us. Then we ran downstairs and huddled in fear."



Standing with one of his Hungarian liberators, Cardinal Mindszenty is shown as he arrived in Budapest on Oct. 31, 1956. The Cardinal, freed by a Hungarian Army Task Force from a castle in Felsopeteny, was hailed by throngs on his return as Russian Armored Forces were withdrawing from the city.

Iona, the only one with a cool head, started praying the rosary.

"The inevitable happened. One of the tanks fired into our building, demolishing the entire front wall and turning out apartment into a pile of rubble. I dashed up the stairs and stopped dead. Father was lying dead, still alive, but only half-alive. He stood there like a pillar of stone, staring blankly at the chaos, then collapsed to the floor. He is a cripple to this day, paralyzed from the waist down."

Asszony Kovacs began to sob and I wanted to crawl into the floor for shame. I apologized for causing her to relive this horrible experience.

"But she insisted on continuing. 'I want you to know everything.'"

Laszlo and Istan, meanwhile, had been forced with other Freedom Fighters to retreat to a building surrounded by Russians. Finally, the exhausted youths were willing to surrender, for realization they would be pardoned. "The condition was promised, but as soon as the youths walked out of the building, their hands cupped behind their heads, they were mercilessly mowed down by machine guns. Istan was one of them."

Asszony Kovacs took her handkerchief to wipe away her tears. "As for Laszlo, he sensed in time what was happening. He tried to find Istvan, but it was too late. In the nick of time, he and several others escaped over a roof and fled to Austria, Switzerland, some to America. Laszlo preferred to stay in Germany, partly out of a vague hope of someday returning."

Few outsiders can appreciate what Hungary means to a Hungarian. It is not quite true to call it nationalism. It is more than that. It is faith, culture, history, and a language so unique, so deeply a part of him, a Hungarian can never completely feel at home anywhere else. The yearning to return home is so great...

Immediately after the Revolution, fires raged all over the city, women between ten and sixty were raped, Soviet troops (brought from remote Asian parts of Russia, some thought they were Japs), Berlin, others asked directions on the street to "the Suez Canal") looted everywhere. A warrant went out for Laszlo's arrest, the Kovacs family were among thousands officially declared unacceptable. Mr. Kovacs's pension was slashed, salaries were reduced one-third, and the family was forcibly evicted to another apartment they shared with three other families.

lies. The country was shipped to a general strike. 10,000 Hungarians were deported to Siberia, 80,000 refugees poured into Austria in one week alone.

Today life is much better for the Kovacs than they have known it for many years. Although the living standard is far below that of Western countries, it is easily the highest, next to Poland, in the Soviet bloc. While stores are unevenly stocked with food and manufactured goods, the supply is able to meet the basic demand. People are well fed and neatly, if not fashionably, clothed. The atmosphere on the street is relaxed rather than tense. There is full employment of a sort, although many thousands still live in destitute circumstances. Budapest's two million residents are desperately jammed into housing, for half that number. The monthly salary for an unskilled worker is less than \$40, while a good suit costs between \$50 and \$80. The average Hungarian earns half as much as the average American and yet pays twice as much for rent, food, and clothing. And the Austrian isn't living in luxury.

During one of my visits, Jozsef pulled a photograph from his wallet showing a former schoolmate who had fled to California during the Revolution and is now an electrician. "Look at his car, a Buick! Is it true that all workers in America have a car?"

I asked the family if I could take them for a drive and then to a nice place with gypsy music for dinner. But after a first impulsive reaction of delight, they backed down. "No," stammered Mr. Kovacs, reaching for German words long forgotten. "On second thought, it would be unwise to be seen with an American, a Jew... list at that, in public. It is a risk we cannot afford to take."

So I had to see Budapest alone during the remaining days of my stay. Whenever I stepped by to keep Mr. Kovacs company, I played a game of chess with him, and look at his stamp collection. During these visits, he painstakingly poured over a map of Budapest with me, showing me "points of interest" not included in official tours.

It was easy to see why Budapest is called the "Paris of the East," for its former glitter, still shimmers from a glorious past and, along with it, scars as at the time. The very stones, its Catholicism, St. Stephen crops up again and again. At Marx Square, the main boulevard, Lenin korpus unabashedly continues as Saint Istvan korut (St. Stephen's Ring). St. Stephen shows up again at the Millennium Monument, and St. Stephen's Basilica dominates the skyline on the Pest side of the Danube, along with the Parliament Building, whose Communist red star glows in the night.

Across the Danube in Buda, centuries of glorious Catholic history are embodied in the Matthias Church, whose origins go back seven centuries. For a century and a half, during the Turkish occupation, it served as a Moslem mosque. From here, Pope Innocent XI decreed the ringing of the Angelus. Here were crowned and married Hungary's kings. Nothing so clearly symbolizes the state of the Church in Hungary today as the Matthias Church on one of the hills of Buda and less than a mile down the Danube, Gellert Hill, named after St. Gellert, where the statue of a Russian soldier stands solemnly under the statue of victory.

The Kovacs Budapest of today is full of paradoxes, baffling even to them. For the car is a distant dream, yet the downtown area is a maze of traffic congestion. One looks in vain for a single Western newspaper or magazine on the newsstands, but bookstores sell novels from Mark Twain to Tennessee Williams. Jazz clubs abound, and the Twist is the rage. But there are neither free elections nor a free press.

There is widespread and open criticism of the shortcomings of the regime and of the Russian occupation. Mr. Kovacs showed me a cartoon in a newspaper alluding to the fact that some farmers are being given back private plots of land. It showed a woman waving a rolling pin over her sleeping husband's head. "It was all right," the caption read, "to loaf on the collective farm. But not on our private plot." But even in a million socialist songs could Jozsef Kovacs open up his own filling station, even if he had the money.

The hated AVO has been replaced by an organization of quiet, well-mannered, non-neatly-dressed in business suits, whose existence, however, destroys people's confidence in the seeming sanity of the Kadar regime. Instead of indiscriminate arrests, there is soft-spoken intimidation. Mr. Kovacs told me about a close friend of his



Cardinal Mindszenty, Primate of Hungary, wears the face of his battered nation. In this photograph taken just a few hours before the Russians rolled into his country in retaliation against uprisings of the Hungarian rebels and their storming of the Budapest secret police station, Cardinal Mindszenty took refuge in the American Legation in Budapest.

who was sitting one day in a cafe. "Suddenly, an impeccably dressed man sat at his table, quietly flashed his secret-police identity card, advised him, in ever so friendly a tone, not to be seen in public with such and such a person any more, and suggested that he be a bit more cautious about political remarks." Thus, instead of terror, the secret police quietly remind certain individuals of their past and dutifully keep their case files up to date. This "gentleness" is not, however, due to any sudden magnanimity on the regime's part but stems from the realization that the blood on its hands from the Revolution has not yet washed away and, an overwhelming desire to project a favorable and respectable image to the world at large.

There has been a great deal of fuss made over the regime's political amnesty. The Kovacs fear that there are still a great many prisoners, including some of considerable importance, unaccounted for and that the hushabout will blind the world—and the regime—to neglect and forget the remaining prisoners rolling in their cells.

As for Russian troops, they are conspicuous by their absence. I personally saw only a few dozen drilling in the country near Budapest and about another dozen sightseeing in the city. It is believed that several hundred thousands are stationed in the hinterland. Fraternization of Hungarians with their "liberators" is nonexistent. Soviet technicians, advisers, and soldiers lead a lonely, isolated life.

Veteran observers, both in Vienna and in Budapest, agree that the vast majority of Hungarians are unimpressed by the current "humanization" trend. "Yes, life is better now," Asszony Kovacs said to me, "but who knows for how long?" Already the Budapest newspaper Magyar Nemzet is raising doubts about

the "liberalization." Premier Kadar, who himself suffered during the Rakosi terror regime appears to be genuinely interested in promoting a more liberal form of socialism. But he is squeezed between forces. He is beholden to the Soviet Union and, within his own ranks, he must tread his way very carefully between the right wing, represented by Ernst Kallai and Stefan Szirmai, and the left wing, which favors a Stalinist approach, under Charles Kis and Anthony Apru.

It is foolish therefore to speak of the present improvements as a victory of the Revolution, though they are definitely gains resulting from it. The Hungarians are making the most of a hopeless situation. They know, as the saying goes, how to squeeze juice out of discarded lemon rinds. Or, as someone has remarked, "A Hungarian is a snake who goes into a revolution door, behind you and comes out ahead."

The Kovacs, like their son Laszlo, made no effort to hide their bitterness over the failure of the West to come to the aid of Hungary during the Revolution. The regime, on its part, is compelled to compromise with the Hungarian people, because it realizes that Hungary will always remain an ungovernable territory for the Soviet Union and cannot possibly afford to risk another revolution.

The paradoxical mixture of light and shadow, of freedom and restriction, that characterizes the trend in Hungary today is nowhere more pronounced than in Church-State relations. I visited dozens of churches all over Budapest at various hours of the day and found them all in use, all well-attended during Mass and devotions, not only by old people but also by the young.

A continuous stream of worshippers could be observed at any time of day in the downtown churches. The Catholic book shop and religious

goods store on one of the main business streets did not seem to want for customers. The Catholic news service Magyar Kiraly, and publications by Ernő Katolikus and Vigilia enjoy a wide distribution. Through the open doorway into the courtyard of the central seminary on Bolvosi Dand utca, I caught a glimpse of forty young seminarians leaving chapel.

There are many paradoxes. Religious instruction of children is permitted, if parents request it in writing. Yet all over Hungary, Catholic teachers secretly teach religion in schools. Mr. Kovacs told of a high-ranking Communist official who went to a remote village, where he was unknown, to marry in the Church.

When I tried to interview a high-ranking Budapest clergyman, he froze into silence and restricted the discussion to a vague reference to the full churches. The "Peace Priest" movement, in which certain members of the clergy and hierarchy are said to have compromised with the re-

gime, remains a baffling enigma. Elsewhere, I tried to learn something of the condition of the Church from one of the country's most prominent Catholic laymen. He distanced his reply to my question in his office in the presence of five witnesses, his secretary typing everything in German in triplicate. The end result was a vague, non-committal statement, highly sensitive to the regime about "hated churches" and "increased number of Communists."

I showed this statement to the Kovacs, and Asszony Kovacs immediately said, "Why, this is full of half-truths, but you must realize that this man's hands are tied." The Kovacs themselves do not attend church in their own parish but have for the past six years attended Mass in another part of the city. Asszony Kovacs told me, "One day downtown I was about to cross the street where a row of taxis were lined up, when suddenly my eye caught a familiar face in the driver's seat. I couldn't believe my eyes. There, wearing black, a chauffeur's cap and a man's leather jacket, was Slater-Mary, my former mistress. She was a famous actress, a famous teacher. Slater, I blurted excitedly, 'don't you remember me, Jozsef Kovacs?' At first, she seemed to show a faint sign of recognition, but then her face hardened and she barked, 'Who are you? I don't know you.' Then she turned on the ignition and drove away, even though her car was empty." Yes, explained Mr. Kovacs, "during the terror regime, the convents and monasteries were confiscated and thousands of nuns and religious were driven away. Today, they are the taxi drivers, sewer cleaners, and charwomen of Budapest."

While, on the one hand, leading Budapest newspapers highly praised Pope John XXIII's recent encyclical Pacem in Terris (quoting it out of context), it was not available in the Catholic book store nor was it published in any Catholic periodical.

The Kovacs family was divided over whether Cardinal Mindszenty should leave Hungary. The parents took the view that he is not only a symbol of resistance to communism but he is the primate of Hungary and "more than that, he is a vital part of Hungary itself." In his person are embodied not only the dying values of the old order but order itself. The living values that alone are worth holding. "Try to understand," said Mr. Kovacs, "what this means. Few people outside of Hungary can appreciate this." Iona, however, expressed what is becoming an increasing common view among the young generation, that

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it is doubtful if Cardinal Mindszenty's value as a symbol can be sustained. His long exile has been in effect a "trial." Asszony Kovacs said, "He is dead." And the Revolution, it has been buried by the world.

On my last evening in Budapest, I was invited by the Kovacs for dinner, which proved to be more of a banquet and surely cost some member of the family a week's wages. Mr. Kovacs had been lifted into his car and I hurried. Asszony Kovacs said, "He is dead." And the Revolution, it has been buried by the world.

By the time I was ready to depart, the eyes were moist. I pressed a carton of American cigarettes into Mr. Kovacs's lap, for him and his son, bottles of perfume for Asszony Kovacs and her daughter, and several ball-point pens, which are a rare and expensive commodity in Hungary. Asszony Kovacs gave me a bag filled with Bette's Hungarian version of apple strudel, "so eat on the way back." I also took along an empty medicine bottle (from West Germany) from Mr. Kovacs, promising to have it sent back refilled. "It is so good," she said, "it is so good." In addition, I took along several books for Laszlo.

At the door, there was a final round of handshaking. "Tell me," Mr. Kovacs said, "that we all miss him very much and hope to see him someday. But do not let him be too easily impressed by reports of improvements here. What is good today may not be good tomorrow. Tell him to stay where he is. There is no future here."

Hungary Needs More Schools

Vienna — (NC) — Church authorities in communist-ruled Hungary are negotiating with government officials for permission to increase the number of Catholic high schools there, it has been reported here.

Meanwhile, for the first time since the Communist party came to power in Hungary following World War II, graduates of Catholic high schools are being permitted to enter state universities following protests by Catholic parents who charged their children were being discrim-

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