

25th October 1956 in Budapest

by Sandor P Vaci, 2006

25th October was the third day of the Revolution. I had an observer's view of events, belonging to neither university nor school nor office. I marched and looked, occasionally talked to people around me then would drift away on my own.

On the afternoon of 23rd the marches started triggered by a list of demands stuck on lampposts. I left the place where I trained, near the British Embassy, with a friend to see what the excitement was about and soon joined the crowd. The autumn day was sunny and warm. Unofficial gatherings were forbidden; there was anticipation without knowing what would happen. The friend and I soon lost touch and we never saw each other again, nor did I ever return to work. The Revolution put a full stop to that part of my life.

Later the same day I ended up in front of Parliament with many other curious and hopeful thousands. We waited and waited, darkness fell, frustration grew, the lights were switched off so newspaper torches were lit. Someone shouted '*let's go to the Radio Station*'. Maybe a hundred arrived in the narrow Bródy Sándor utca (street). We choked on teargas grenades thrown out by the security police (AVO) to disperse us. But no way would we go! We sheltered under the dark arches and the braver more athletic hurled the grenades back through the now broken windows. After the initial skirmishes, a contingent of soldiers in strict military lines and step left the building. Someone threw a dustbin over them. It rolled on their green-blue caps as if on a cobbled street. A young soldier was injured, he was in shock, blood poured down his face. Women mothered him into a café to be washed down. Even though there was no doubt in my mind, which side was in the right I still felt pity for him. Decided then that things were getting out of hand and walked to my aunt Kató's flat nearby. The real shooting started afterwards.

Next morning aunt and uncle locked me into their flat to keep me out of trouble. Mad with frustration I tried to climb out through the kitchen window, but could not undo the bars. Eventually, Kató returned and after much arguing and

persuading she agreed to go with me to see the action at the top end of Bajcsy-Zsilinszky út (road). One could hear machine gun rattle a long way off. As we walked nearer the crowd thinned, people were in doorways peeking out and we found ourselves on our own. The feeling of danger overcame my sense of curiosity, a strange sensation of conscious fear crept up and, ashamed, I agreed to turn back. The fighting went on into the night. We lived on rumours.

By the 25th the fighting had ceased near us and it felt safe enough to see what had really happened. Not many people were about. The worst fighting was around a cinema near the Dohány útca Synagogue. Broken glass was scattered, pieces of bricks were strewn on the road. Two abandoned open-backed lorries were stranded at strange angles, their back tyres shot out. The Army used the square-nosed lorries painted in dark green as troop carriers, but there was no sign of soldiers. A body had been dragged into the dimness of a doorway. The man had a long coat, worn shoes and in peculiar Hungarian fashion the upper body was covered in brown wrapping paper. We looked on him with shock and sadness.

Here at the major intersection of Rákóczy út the road widens and the tree-lined Múzeum körút (boulevard) is only minutes away from the Radio Station. The Asztoria Szálloda, a luxury hotel built before the war, occupies one corner. The pale stone façade in Travertine marble still bears pockmarks from the Second World War. I stood diagonally opposite the hotel under a clock of many rendezvous-s, Rákóczy út on my left and Museum körút ahead.

The strategic location was occupied in front of the hotel by three or four Russian tanks facing east to Rákóczy út. The crews were standing on the bodies of the T-54s or peering out of the hatches into the distance. It soon became clear that a demonstration was making its way down towards them, the front row arm- in-arm men and women waving red-white-and-green Hungarian flags. The white stripe had a hole where the Hungarian version of the hammer-and-sickle had been cut out. We looked through the hole for another ten days until it was stitched up again. Demands were shouted in unison. The crowd, foolish or fearless, was not going to stop. When they were a few hundred metres away from the tanks the Russians became anxious, the commander barked at the crews, the padded helmets of the driver and gunners

disappeared under the hatches, the guns lowered. I stood there with others expecting to witness the horror. For a moment I wished it was a film where one could look away: the tension became unbearable. We expected exploding shells, torn limbs, guts spilling out, burnt flesh, screams and blood on the granite paving, survivors running bent over for cover.

But there was no looking away. The Russians hesitated. Would they shoot into unarmed civilians with tank bursting-shells? These soldiers had been stationed in Hungary for some time. Mostly confined to barracks, when the opportunity arose they would chase hairy-legged peasant girls and even give a silver-toothed smile. Some people standing behind the tanks tried to engage the attention of the commander. And then relief arrived in the shape of cigarettes. How many conflicts could have been avoided if people had a drag together first? Smoking is men's shared experience, a moment when the craved-for deeply inhaled nicotine relaxes the eyes. Offer a light, pass it around, stay silent – endless possibilities for togetherness. Whatever, they did not shoot – the marchers arrived surrounding the tanks. People climbed up and hugged the soldiers, someone put a flag into a gun, the danger had passed. They were not going to shoot; they were going to hug, at least then. The fate of these soldiers is unknown, perhaps they signed their own death warrants by this brotherly act – was it fraternising with the enemy, cowardice, bringing shame on the Red Army? They were transformed from being hated to being instantly loved; not a million propaganda words could match this simple act.

After a while the original flag wavers suggested going to Parliament tér (square) to continue the demonstration with their new friends, the Russian tank crews. It was an odd procession. First the tanks with flags still in the gun barrels, Russians and Hungarians riding on the domed turrets. Next the shot-up lorries had been started up and limped along like three-legged dogs. Lastly, the remaining marchers whom I joined. It took us half an hour to get there. By the time we arrived the tanks were lined up in the centre with their flags, and a crowd stood around in the square. I stopped under the arches of the Ministry of Agriculture (even in the excitement it felt safer there) and suddenly, amazingly, my mother and my aunt Magda materialised, begging me to leave. I wanted to stay. Who would want to be left out of this? However, after much pleading and blackmail (making my widowed

mother's life a misery, you are my only son, and so on), I relented, and walked back with them to Kató's flat.

Not much time had passed before we heard gunfire and soon lorries drove past stacked with the dead and the bloodied. One of the most shameful episodes took place on the square that led to ever bitter fighting. Either the AVO or a maverick Communist group sprayed the crowd with machine guns from the top of the ministry buildings. The Russians returned fire but the gunmen could not be seen behind the parapets. Many died, a school friend just managed to crawl away. People fled in panic.

The Russians probably rejoined their units. No one knows what happened to them (their imagined interrogation would make a good play). Perhaps next time they did start shooting or perhaps they were obliterated in the crossfire at the military barracks, where a whole line of Russian tanks ended up as fragmented metal.

Since the political changeover in 1989 most of the Soviet memorials have been removed or placed in the Statue Park of a past era. That episode of togetherness between peasant soldiers and civilians lasted only hours and then was lost for a whole generation. But it was a great moment that deserves a monument to itself.

June 2000, revised 2005 London

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Since writing this I have written a play called *The Tank Crew* (2008), which I changed later to *No Neat Endings*. In this form it had a reading on 15th November 2017 directed by Sarah Berger in front of an invited audience at the Ognisko Polskie Club, Exhibition Road, London.

For my other writings see: www.sandorpvaci.com