## Francis Laping

### An Epitaph for Heroes*

In the autumn of 1956, a small nation along the banks of the Danube stood up almost to a man, woman and child and struggled for a breath of freedom.

This story tells of this struggle. But it is not the real story. Nothing written in words and printed on paper can be that. For the story of the Hungarian uprising was written in blood.

**Ernõ**

The Hungarian revolt, the fighting part of it, began on October 23, 1956. The day before, Ernõ, a 22-year-old student, attended a meeting in the lecture hall at Budapest University of Technology. The meeting lasted until 2 AM. Its purpose was to organize a street demonstration for government reforms allowing relief from repression. After all, the students reasoned, the Poles, staring down the hard-line factions of their government, had recently gained a measure of liberalization. Stalin was dead. Had not Nikita Khrushchev, the sturdy miner's son himself, eased the shackles of his own people? Had he not condemned the brutal excesses of Beria's secret police?

One of the speakers at the meeting was a lieutenant colonel attached to the university as a military instructor. He warned the students that general orders had gone out to the army to curb any demonstrators.

At 2 P.M. on October 23, Ernõ and his fellow students started a parade at the General Joseph Bem monument, erected in honor of the Polish general who had fought with the Hungarians in the 1848 revolution. But the young people did not linger there.

They paid tribute to Bem's valor and expressed solidarity with Poland's drive for greater freedom. Then, silently, they marched to the Parliament.

At 5:30 P.M., Rádio Budapest broadcast the news of the event. Then came a significant admission, a straw in the wind. The Ministry of the Interior initially had banned all demonstrations, being harshly opposed to all popular demonstrations, but now the Politburo of the Hungarian Workers' (Communist) Party had changed the decision.

**The Crowd Grows**

At first, there were only thousands but they were joined by young workers, passersby, motorists, soldiers, old people and secondary-school students. The vast crowd grew to tens of thousands. The streets resounded with these slogans: 'People of Kossuth, march forward hand in hand, "We want new leadership–We trust Imre Nagy.' The shouts reverberate, the national colors flutter in the air, windows are open. The streets of Budapest are filled with a new wind of greater freedom.

For, having sung their songs, the crowd began to shout. Hungarian flags, with the Communist emblem cut out, fluttered in the cool breeze. Hungarian Army troops had been watching the demonstration, uneasily at first, then with approval. Spontaneously, without fuss, the crowd suddenly began to move over to the radio station to try to have their demands broadcast.

It was at this point that what started as a spirited but rather mild-mannered protest changed to grim rebellion.

About two hours had passed since the delegation had left for Rádio Budapest. Ernõ and the crowd grew fearful. Somebody said, "Let's go." Others took up the cry. Slowly, inexorably, the crowd moved toward the station.

“There,” recalls Ernõ, “we got bad news. Our delegation had been arrested and were held captive by the secret police. There was only one thing to do. We had to rescue our friends. We knew what the police would do to them. They had tortured and killed so many before them. We started to attack the building.” Meanwhile, another student group went to the head office of the Communist newspaper and persuaded the printers to start turning out revolutionary leaflets. When two of the newspaper’s bosses arrived on the scene to see what was going on, the students set fire to their car. But back at the radio station, the police staved off the students’ surge. They did so by firing wildly into the unarmed crowd. The revolt had drawn its first blood. The sacrificial altar was the free expression of ideas.

**Feri**

Among the most vivid and detailed firsthand accounts of the Hungarian revolution is the story of Feri, a young man working at The Ganz factory in Buda when the first rumblings of discontent emanated from the capital.

“There were some 6,000 workers in the plant,” Feri recalls. “Some were Communists, some were not. As for myself, I worked by day to make a living. At night, I studied in a technical school. I just wanted to learn something. I never joined any of the Communist organizations, and for that I spent three years in a forced labor camp,” he said.

“Quite a few days before the fighting began, the factory workers had been restless. There was a lot of grumbling about poor wages, red tape and the general lack of freedom to do as you pleased. We just didn’t like the way the government was running things. Everybody was constantly being watched. There were daily rumors of midnight arrests and executions by the secret police. We didn’t trust the newspapers because they were of course controlled by the regime.”

“Suddenly word spread through the factory – there would be a big demonstration at 3 o’clock that afternoon. The date was October 23.”

**The Workers March**

The demonstration was a fateful gathering of young people around the statue of General Bem and a thousand workers marched to the scene; Laping Feri was among them.

After watching the students and joining them in shouting “Down with the government,” Feri and the workers walked to the Parliament building.

“The government had heard about the disturbances and they cut off the electric power, perhaps hoping to keep everybody off the street. It was dark by then and suddenly something amazing happened. Thousands of people rolled up newspapers and lit them with matches. It was a fantastic sight, a sea of torches. Everybody was yelling and singing. The minister of the interior, Ernõ Gerõ finally appeared at the window. ‘You are scum,’ he roared at the people below. ‘You are trash.’”

“We shouted back to him. Then somebody cried, ‘Let’s go to the radio station.’ And the whole crowd began to move toward the center of the city. More and more people joined us along the way. These people had no guns, no weapons at all. We just wanted to get into the radio station to announce freedom. But when we reached the station, demonstrations had already started in front of the building. We were told that the secret police who were inside the station had just shot a Hungarian army officer who had led a delegation of students and workers into the building trying to negotiate a peaceful surrender of the Communists. This, I believe, was the first blood spilled in the revolt.”

**The Milk Truck**

“It must be remembered that most of the regular police and most of the army were with us, not against us. The real enemy was the secret police. They were now tossing tear gas bombs into the crowd. We staggered about, holding wet handkerchiefs to our faces. A milk truck drove up and somebody in the crowd recognized the driver as one of the secret policemen and dragged him down. The milk cans tumbled from the truck and they were full of guns. We took them.”

“Then, out of nowhere, an injured army officer, a colonel, appeared and took charge. He had been shot in the face. He was bandaged but in good shape. He told us to set up barricades,

and we overturned a few trolley cars to block off the streets to the station. Then, after a night of vicious fighting, the crowd broke through the police guard at 10 in the morning and took over the radio station."

"I didn't go in myself because the colonel had assigned me to guard the entrance, checking everybody coming and going. Later I found out that the people had entered the station and cut down the secret police to a man. The freedom fighters went on the air and the revolt spread to every corner of Budapest."

"I and a couple of friends were called into the colonel's office in a building across the street, some museum as I recall. 'I need a car, 'the colonel said. 'Get me a car.' 'Where from?' I asked. 'What do I care?' he said. 'Just get me a car.' So there we stood on the street, Hamerli Joska and I, looking for a car. We weren't used to this sort of thing at all. I was getting worried."

"But suddenly I spotted a Mercedes, a large one, coming toward us. We stopped it. There was a chauffeur in the front seat, and a lady in the back seat. 'We are the revolution,' we yelled. 'Get the hell out.' They did, and we delivered the Mercedes to the colonel, who was very pleased. He appointed us his personal bodyguards."

**The Communists and the Russians**

"The Communist government by then was desperate. They were saying over the radio that they were in control and that this was a fascist uprising. The rebels were not fascists, of course. They were workers, students, including many Communists who were disillusioned and fed up with the way they had to live."

"As for the Russians, I must say they gave us little trouble in the early days. Many of the soldiers had been in Hungary a long time and had become friendly with the people. Some even helped us, gave us weapons. But those were the regulars, and old timers. Then Russians were the new troops Khrushchev sent in. They were very young and some didn't even know where they were. they thought they were being sent to the Middle East to fight the Israelis and the French and the British who have moved into Egypt. They kept asking, 'Is this the Suez Canal?' when they were looking at the Danube."

"The next day morning I saw a bunch of people standing in the street. I went closer. There was a young Russian on a tank, and an old lady was crying up to him, 'Don't shoot us, we don't want to fight you, we're fighting our own government.'"

"And the Russian, a kid of no more than 20, burst into tears and said, 'Mama, mama, I don't shoot mama. . .'"

**At the Parliament**

"Noontime, word spread that there would be a rally in front of the Parliament. No new government had been formed yet."

"When I arrived there must have been 50,000 people there already. The whole square was filled with old and young men, women. I edged my way closer to the Parliament steps so I could see what was going on. I stood on the second step, craning my neck. There were Russian tanks hemming the people in. And suddenly somebody started shooting."

"The whole bunch around me dropped to the ground. People began to scream. I couldn't see at first who was shooting at whom. Everybody was running, pushing in all directions. I caught a glimpse of a Russian tank. Its machine gun was firing upwards. To this day I haven't figured out exactly what happened. Some say the Parliament was full of secret police and they started firing on the people, and the Russians shot back at the secret police. Later on I found out that the Russians were firing at the roofs of the surrounding buildings, where secret police were firing at the crowd. There was chaos and panic. I jumped off the steps and people were all over me, people on top of other people, trying to run, trying to get away. I fell to the ground. Somebody stepped on my neck, pinning me down. I couldn't breathe. I looked at the ground and saw a large puddle of blood. People all around me were falling. I thought to myself, 'My God, they're shooting at us. They're killing everybody.'"

"Somehow I wriggled free and dashed to a corner of the Parliament building that seemed to offer some cover from the bullets. A burst of bullets bit into the wall and I hit the ground again."

“When the firing stopped for a moment, I crawled on my stomach to the protection of the corner. A young man came running toward me, clutching his stomach. He stumbled and fell. He cried, ‘Help me, I can’t move.’ I crawled toward him, but they started shooting again and he lay still. He was dead. I heard a noise behind me and turned and saw a secret policeman aiming a gun through an open basement window from the Parliament building. He fired a few bursts. Then the window closed and he vanished.”

“By then a dozen people had found my corner and they cowered there, and someone was firing at them. Three or four were hit, right next to me. I was covered with blood.”

Again I struggled free. I looked over the square. It was nearly empty now. An ambulance drove up to a cluster of wounded lying near the center. Two men in white coats stepped out of the ambulance and were immediately cut down by machine gun fire. I thought to myself, ‘I’m going to die, there is no hope.’ But I decided to make one more attempt to save myself. I stood up and started running across the square, I tripped over a wire strung to keep people off the grass. I hit the ground with full force. I lay there, stunned. When I regained my senses, I saw a middle-aged woman lying close by me. ‘Please,’ she begged. ‘Help me move out of here. My legs are hit. I can’t walk.’

“I took hold of her under her arms and tried to drag her behind a tree.”

“There was a shot and it struck her. I held her briefly, but could see that she was dead. I let go of her and ran like a fox.”

**Away From the Shooting**

“I didn’t know where I was running but suddenly I spotted a large store window in front of me and I flung myself at it and went right through it. It was a Communist book store, of all things. I almost laughed in a crazy way. I went deeper inside and I saw a corridor with a stairway leading down. I staggered down the steps. I came to a cellar filled with people. They were hiding from the shooting. Somebody said, ‘We can’t stay here, there are secret police on the roof and they’ll be coming down.’ “A little old man became very excited when he saw me, covered with blood and dirt. He grabbed me and screamed, ‘Let’s show them what the Communists have done to us. Let’s go to the American embassy.’”

“We did. An American official came out to meet us. He seemed shocked. He told us he’d informed his government of all that was happening here. He couldn’t do anything for us, he said.”

“On my way home I stopped at the radio station. The colonel was there. He stared at me. ‘Where the hell have you been?’ I said, ‘I was at the Parliament.” He said, ‘Well, you look like a mess. You better get cleaned up; you can’t go on the street this way.’”

“So I went home, took a bath and slept 10 hours. The next morning I went outside. I wanted to go to the station as the colonel had told me to. The street was strangely quiet. There was no traffic. I saw some people walking by fast and they told me, ‘The Russians are here with their tanks.”

“I went to a friend’s house but he wasn’t in. In the hallway, a little boy, maybe 11 years old, stood, holding a small rifle. I asked him what he was doing. ‘I want to shoot a Russian tank,’ he said with a grin. I told him to give me the rifle and get himself down the cellar before he got hurt. He didn’t like this at all, so I grabbed him by the arm and pushed him along.”

“By then the revolt was three days old and Budapest was in flames. The colonel moved into an office across the street from the radio station and tried to coordinate his moves with the moves of other forces throughout the city.”

**Get Medical Supplies**

“He ordered us, me and Hammerli Joska to take three trucks to the Austrian border near Gyõr, to try to bring beck medical supplies for the wounded. We were nearly starving and we were unshaven and looked like hell. All we’d eaten was a little bread and meat which the people had brought us from their homes. So we took off in the trucks towards Gyõr.”

On the way, we witnessed a horrible sight – the bodies of the victims of the police massacre in Magyaróvár. The corpses were lying in a school building, and their relatives were weeping over the dead.

“It was the worst sight I’d seen up to then. We drove on but for a long time; we didn’t feel like talking. At a crossing near the border some men flagged us down. They were in uniform but without insignia. We didn’t know who or what they were and we were scared.”

“One of them pointed a gun at me. ‘Where are you going ?’ he demanded. We told him we were looking for medical supplies for the wounded in Budapest. ‘I don’t believe you,’ he said. ‘You want to escape across the border. He added that we were under arrest. They put us in a room and we spent an uneasy night. The next morning we were taken before a colonel for interrogation. He did wear insignia. He was a colonel of the border police. He kept insisting that we wanted to escape. We kept denying it. Back to jail. Another night.”

“At 3 A.M. five soldiers entered our cell. They told us to get dressed, then loaded us into a truck. One of my friends whispered, ‘Now we’ve done it. It’s all over. We’re going to be shot.’ I said, ‘Don’t be silly.’ I wasn’t feeling very confident myself.”

“We drove through the darkness. The leader of the group, a young lieutenant, had told us we were going to Budapest.’ But we could see we were driving through a wooded area, and my friend said, ‘Hell, we’re not going to Budapest.’”

“Suddenly the truck stopped. The lieutenant motioned for us to get out of the truck. ‘What’s going on?’ I asked.” The lieutenant looked uncomfortable.”

“I suddenly felt very angry. I started to shout at the lieutenant. I yelled at him. ‘So this is what they teach you -- Hungarians shooting Hungarians. . . Is that what you learned in Communist school?’”

“‘Shut up,’ the lieutenant said. ‘Just shut up.’”

“But I could see that he was embarrassed and so I kept shouting at him. He fingered his gun, uncertain what to do. He turned to us. ‘Get the hell out of here,’ he snapped. ‘And don’t come back.’ He didn’t have to say it twice.”

**Released**

“It was snowing and we kept walking, completely lost. We had been wandering about a couple of hours when we saw a small I railroad shack ahead. We knocked on the door. An old man was inside. He told us how to get to the nearest road.”

“The road was deserted but suddenly a truck approached and we stopped it. ‘We’re farmers taking food to Budapest,’ the driver told us. We told him who we were, and he said, ‘Good, hop in.’”

“It was bitter cold. It was an open truck, my friends dug themselves into a heap of potatoes. There was the carcass of a cow, with the innards removed, and I used the cow’s body to protect myself from the biting wind.”

“Suddenly the truck slowed to a halt. There were strange loud voices ahead of us. The driver hissed, ‘Russians.’ just before I ducked I saw Russian soldiers walking toward us. I made a quick decision. I knew I couldn’t run. I squeezed myself deep into the cow’s carcass.”

“One of the Russians looked into the back of the truck. I could hear him breathing. ‘Any guns?’ one of the soldiers asked. ‘No, tovarish,’ our driver answered.”

“‘Go on then,” he said.

**Lost Cause**

“We finally reached the outskirts of Budapest, and saw dozens of Russian T52 tanks entrenched, surrounding the city.”

“As we reached Budapest, I went back to the radio station. Everybody was gone. I went home. The next day I finally found the colonel at an army barrack. We fought around the place for three days. But it got worse and worse. People were killed. Some were weakened with hunger and just went home. There was no ammunition left, in the end.”

“The colonel came up to our little group and said, ‘There is nothing we can do anymore. It is no use.’ He slowly walked away. I never saw him again.”

“It was clear that the revolution was lost. But there was still some fighting going on. I went up to the Fortress of Buda where an old man, Szabó bácsi – as they called him – was organizing some last remnants of resistance and I helped out there. The man was amazing. He was teaching us how to trap Russian tanks with bedsheets. When a tank came near, we would stretch a wet sheet across the street. The sheet clung to the vizier so the Russians couldn’t see. When they opened the turret to get their bearings, the people threw Molotov cocktails into the tanks.”

“We also smeared the hilly streets of Buda with industrial soap to make the tanks skid and slow down. After a while of this work, I went back to the factory. They were giving out two weeks’ wages because most of the workers had been too busy fighting to collect their pay.”

“It was obvious by then that the battle was ending all over the city. I was undecided whether to stay in Budapest or flee to Austria when a group of Russian soldiers picked me up on the street and shoved me into a covered truck. It was already filled with young people. They were telling each other that they were being sent to Siberia. I was still hoping for a miracle.”

“We were sitting in the truck, just waiting. There was a commotion. The door opened and a young guy with a rifle stuck his head into the car.”

‘We got rid of the Russians,’ he said. ‘Get out of here. Don’t let them catch you again.’ I could have kissed him. Once again I was free. But I knew that I had to get out of Hungary. I said good-bye to my parents. They understood.”

**Goodbye**

“After reaching the city of Zalaegerszeg, we walked towards the border over secondary roads. A truck full of young people like myself stopped beside me. They were in high spirits.”

‘Where are you going? ‘they asked me. ‘To see my grandmother,’ I said.

‘So are we. Get in.’

We were stopped only once at a bridge crossing the Rába river. A Communist guard threatened us. But there were maybe 25 of us and some had guns. We disarmed him and someone suggested we kill him on the spot, and we argued about it for a while. I said, if there’s to be any shooting, a bunch of border guards will be on top of us. So we tied him up and sat him in cold water off the road to let him cool off till his comrades found him.

“It was late at night when we finally crossed the border. We saw our first Austrian village. There was a restaurant of some kind, and the people came out and gave us cocoa and food.”

“I spent some time in a refugee camp. The Austrians had a good setup for people like us. I helped an American Army intelligence officer screen refugees for several weeks. Then, at the end of December, I was taken to Bremerhaven and we sailed on a Navy ship, the Leroy Eltinge, to America.”

**America**

“The Brooklyn Navy yards, then Camp Kilmer in New Jersey. Then Philadelphia. Work, college, a new life.”

“In 1965 I visited my homeland as an accredited photojournalist for the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin. The country had a little more freedom than it had before the revolt. The people no longer lived in quite the same terror. But there was little real joy in Budapest and wherever else I traveled during my visit. The color of communism is not red, but a uniform gray, and Hungary, for the most part, is covered by a gray cloud.”

“The people still talk about what happened that fall of 1956. They say things are not good but they are better than they might be. The revolution was terribly costly to the people, but the Communists have learned a lesson, too. They know that people will face death rather than live with torture and humiliation.”

“I do not think there will be another revolution. The last one cost too much. The older people I talked to seem resigned. The young ones want to get out. They kept telling me, ‘You were lucky’.”

The world stood by while Hungary died. In one of freedom's most agonized hours that sheer human courage turned into one of its finest, as well, the democracies looked on in compassion and then turned the other way. The Hungarians who merely sought a measure of human dignity had to fight alone.

In the chess game of the giants, the Hungarians were pawns. But for thirteen days they fought and died like kings. Remembering them is the most we can do.

It is also the least.

*This story by Francis Laping (Feri) was written and published by the Philadelphia Bulletin in 1965.

***Francis Laping***

*Laping was born in Krnjaja, a small German village in Yugoslavia in 1929. In 1948 he illegally escaped from Yugoslavia to Hungary, where he was accused of being a spy for Tito and was jailed for 3 months. In 1952 he was interred and spent 3 years in a forced labor camp in Verpelét, Hungary. In 1957 he fled to the United States, where he specialized in photojournalism after studying at the Philadelphia Museum College of Art. He is honored to have been on the staff of the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin, and his photos have also appeared in the magazines Life and Time. He is married to Cathy Miksath, Kálmán Miksáth's great-granddaughter, and his book "Remember Hungary 1956" was published by Alpha Publications in 1975. He currently lives in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania.*