

## Paul Maléter

### Child of the Five Year Plans

Much of Hungary's twentieth century history – both tragic and inspiring – is reflected in the complex story of the Maléter family.

Paul Maléter's parents, Mária and Pál, came from families who knew each other well in the city of Kassa (Kosice), that was part of Hungary until 1920, then of Czechoslovakia, and today, is in Slovakia. They met in the terrible aftermath of World War II, when Mária's family property was confiscated by communists, but she luckily managed to escape after being arrested. A friend recommended she turn for help to Pál Maléter, a young commander of the Hungarian Frontier Guards, located in Debrecen, Hungary. Upon her arrival, Pál Maléter found housing for Mária, offered her a job, and they soon fell in love. In August, 1945, they got married and started their life together in the largely destroyed city of Budapest, where inflation was rampant, food was in serious shortage, and people's lives were in danger from marauding Soviet soldiers.

Pál was transferred to Vác, and since Mária was pregnant, he urged her to go to her Mother in the relative safety of Szeged, where she gave birth to Paul in June, 1946. They soon moved to Vác, so the family could be together. The next years were filled with happiness, as two daughters, Mária and Judit, joined the family. Pál proved to be an attentive and loving Father. With his professional advancement, however, came frequent transfers, and in 1950 the Maléter family moved back to Budapest.

### Strong communist pressure

In the 1950's the worst days of Stalinist Soviet rule descended on Hungary. The communists demanded total loyalty to the party line, and Pál Maléter's military career and growing co-operation with the communists began to take a serious toll on the Maléters' marriage. Mária's Mother, who lived with the family, and who was the niece of Cardinal Lőrincz, was a special thorn in the communists' side.

Pál's initial attraction to communism began in 1942, when during a time of capture and injury on the Russian Front, to his great surprise, he found his Russian keepers to be unexpectedly kind. His Father, a law professor with Socialist beliefs, was strongly anti-German. Pál was subjected to propaganda lectures by Hungarian communists, and soon distinguished himself by volunteering for dangerous "partisan" missions working with the Russians to free Hungary of Nazi occupation. He believed that a better future awaited Hungary under Soviet rule than under the Nazis.

On the other hand, Mária, whose family members were conservative and deeply religious Catholics, was unable and unwilling to accept communist tenets. Consequently, in the eyes of the communist hierarchy, unless she could be "re-educated," she was a liability for her husband's fast-advancing career. The Maléters, as many others, were under constant surveillance, and Pál had to prove his loyalty to the party time and again.

At age five, young Paul was sent to Rábatamási, to stay on a farm for the summer. He recalls getting a series of short-lived "jobs" - with a gypsy merry-go-round operator for the price of an ice cream cone, and with the local farmer as a cow-herd and ox-cart driver.

In the spring of 1953, party pressure grew on Pál, and he left his family. After attempting a short reconciliation, Mária and Pál were divorced in 1954. The daughters stayed with their Mother, but as was customary in Hungary, Pál got custody of the first-born son, eight year-old Paul, for a short while. After a successful fight in the courts to get Paul back, Mária and the children were on their own, and they faced two years of severe hardships. Once her beloved Mother died, Mária was forced to deal with her children's and her own serious

bouts with illness, substandard living conditions, and systematic intimidation by the communist authorities, in the form of forced settlement of inappropriate strangers into the Maléter apartment.

Paul Maléter was only ten years old at the time, but he remembers October 23, 1956, quite vividly. Next door to the Maléters' apartment, freedom fighters broke into the Marcibányi Square armory to obtain rifles and ammunition. He recalls seeing dead bodies of victims on the sidewalks, both Hungarian and Russian. He observed children first spreading jam on the window of a Russian tank, then throwing a Molotov cocktail down the hatch when the driver emerged. Because his Mother locked Paul into the apartment to keep him away from danger, he had to content himself with making leaflets with revolutionary slogans, "Drive Out the Russians," "The Russians Are Bad, Don't Believe Them," and throwing them down to the street.

### **Pál Maléter's true character revealed**

When news spread all over Budapest of an extraordinarily brave Hungarian colonel, who refused to follow his superior's order to fire on freedom fighters, and instead, chose to join them, Mária Maléter instinctively knew and told her children this brave colonel was surely their Father. She recalled what Pál Maléter had told her years before, when she questioned his patriotism: "Don't worry, Mária, when the time comes, I will be where I belong."

And Pál Maléter was a man of his words: he placed tanks inside and at the entrance of the Kilian Barracks, and repelled all Russian attempts to capture it. In the newly formed Imre Nagy government, Lt. General Pál Maléter was named the new Minister of Defense. He spoke on the radio, calling on citizens to return to work and a normal life: "We must ensure milk for our children, coal for our factories, regular transportation for our workers..." His children felt their Father was speaking directly to them. Paul wrote a letter telling his Father how proud he and his sisters were of him, "because you are a great hero and are fighting on our side." But he also expressed the bewilderment of a child of a broken family when he wrote: "Where were you when we called you and you didn't come?"

On November 3rd an old friend and colleague of Pál Maléter from Vác came to see Mária, with a message that Pál was well, and would come to see the family soon. But that same evening, he fell victim to an oft-used Soviet trap: invited to negotiate at Soviet military headquarters, instead, he was arrested and never returned from the meeting.

He never received his son's letter, nor did he ever see his family again.

### **Escape from Hungary**

After Soviet tanks re-entered Hungary on November 4th, the Maléter family was in grave danger, as their apartment was in the area of the worst fighting. The roof of the building had been destroyed by a tank. They spent days in the neighboring building's basement to keep safe. Mária was urged by friends to leave Hungary as soon as possible, and on November 21, an opportunity for escape was offered to her. Since her daughter, Judit, was ill with the flu, she was forced to leave her with friends, and set off at dawn with Marika and Paul to reach the food truck that would take them to Yugoslavia. (Judit was able to join the family a month later).

Dressed in multiple sets of clothing, the three were hidden in the back of the truck and driven to Zalaegerszeg. Once, they came perilously close to being discovered and turned back by a road patrol, but a Hungarian soldier pretended not to see them under the tarpaulin, and they continued their journey. After taking a train to reach Sopron, at nightfall they embarked on the perilous journey crossing on foot into Austria.

Paul was first taken in by his Mother's cousins in Germany, who wanted to adopt him.

His Mother and sisters were in a camp in Austria, and eventually Maria chose to keep the family together and settle them all in Canada. They flew to the far-away land, and Paul remembers his shock at seeing purple-haired ladies with rhinestone glasses at the airport. Once they arrived at a Canadian refugee camp, Paul saw cold cereal for the first time, and couldn't understand why they were being fed breadcrumbs with milk on it. In Canada the Maléters lived with a French family on a lake. Paul remembers his Mother helping out with housekeeping, but also the good times with "fancy boats," and costume parties held there.

In October 1957, Mária was invited by the International Rescue Committee to speak at the U.N. in New York on behalf of her husband and the other captured government officials. She worked tirelessly to try to get her former husband released from Soviet captivity, but to no avail.

The trip to the U.N., however, enabled her to take her children to the U.S. on a temporary visa. His sisters were put in a boarding school in Philadelphia run by Hungarian nuns, and Paul was soon enrolled in the Buffalo Hungarian Piarist School. After 1958, when his Father was executed, the school would not renew his scholarship, but, Maria had found close friends in James Finan and Walter Mahony, editors at the Reader's Digest, which was interested in the family's story, and who assisted them to settle in New York and arranged for the children to attend schools with their children. A special act of Congress gave the family green cards, backdated to June 16, 1958, the day of Pál Maléter's execution. In January 1959, the Reader's Digest published Mária's feature story on Pál Maléter, "Hungary's Proud Rebel."

### **Paul leads an American life**

The contact Paul previously had with Hungarians stopped. He attended exclusive American boarding schools, and lived a largely American life. He spent six years in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserves, and his studies at Columbia University led to a fine career in hospital architecture, including over 20 years with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Paul first returned to Hungary in 1983, accompanying his wife who was a U.S. delegate to an international conference in Budapest. While it would have been embarrassing for the Hungarian government to deny them visas, Paul's was only issued at the last minute before their departure, and was loosely paper clipped in his American passport – leaving open the possibility that it could be removed at any time. At official conference functions, with his name badge highly visible, Paul found government officials' reactions to be cool at best, and the suite they were provided in the Hyatt Hotel had some very suspicious cabling running under the bed and into the wall. When returning six years later for the dramatic ceremonies around the re-burial of his Father and the other members of the Nagy government, Paul's visa was still on a separate piece of paper, but this time the Hungarian Embassy staff in Washington apologized profusely, and the reception in Budapest was warm and welcoming.

Paul and his wife have subsequently made numerous visits to his many family members remaining in Hungary. His Mother and two sisters live in Florida, and have also returned to Hungary in the years since 1989. He has retained his knowledge of Hungarian remarkably well, and has established friendships with the Hungarian diplomatic corps in Washington. He is immensely proud of his Father's historic role in the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, and looks forward with great anticipation to participating in the upcoming 50th anniversary commemorations.

*As told by Paul Maléter to Edith Lauer*

### **Paul Béla Maléter, AIA Emeritus**

*Paul Maléter is an architect, recently retired after a career designing, planning and building hospitals for the Department of Veteran's Affairs and the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions. Born in Szeged in 1946, raised in Budapest, he left Hungary at the age of 10 in the aftermath of the Hungarian Revolution and the arrest of his Father, the Minister of Defense. After living briefly in Austria, Germany and Canada, he emigrated to the U.S. where he attended The Harvey School, The Hotchkiss School and Columbia University, obtaining a Bachelors Degree in Fine Arts, a Masters Degree in Architecture, and a Master of Science in Health Services Planning and Design. Maléter served in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserves from 1965-1971. Paul is now retired, and lives with his wife in Central Virginia and Washington, D.C.*