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Mtg w. Sit Rom  
Carlucci Drop By.

25/Full  
26/Full

THE WHITE HOUSE  
Evanston WASHINGTON

M6

6-9

cc: Dean

Rita-

a) Max didn't promise  
this guy anything.

b) Could set something  
up w. NSC if LK  
wants

c) Max wasn't that  
impressed ~~by~~ by the  
Hungarian union  
leader

MZ

MEMORANDUM OF CALL

Previous editions usable

*not said  
about*

TO:

*M2 not compressed*

YOU WERE CALLED BY-  YOU WERE VISITED BY-

*Steve Kereben*

OF (Organization)

*734-6066*

PLEASE PHONE  FTS  AUTOVON

*280+util*

*320-350*

WILL CALL AGAIN  IS WAITING TO SEE YOU

RETURNED YOUR CALL  WISHES AN APPOINTMENT

MESSAGE

*Appt. with POTUS  
for Mr. Racz  
(Hungarian union leader)*

RECEIVED BY

*M 820*

DATE

TIME

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THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

June 23, 1987

MEMORANDUM FOR FRITZ ERMARTH  
SPECIAL ASSISTANT TO THE PRESIDENT, NATIONAL  
SECURITY COUNCIL

FROM: MAX GREEN  
OFFICE OF PUBLIC LIAISON

SUBJECT: Proposed meeting with Hungarian labor leader

I know that Frank Carlucci's schedule is very tight on June 25 and 26, but I feel obligated to tell you that the AFL-CIO has asked if he could meet with a Hungarian dissident, Sandor Racz, on either day. Information about Mr. Racz is attached.

I can be reached at x6270.

Thank you.

## Sandor Racz

President of the Budapest Workers' Council in 1956

(based on an interview by Sandor Szilagyi of the Hungarian Democratic Opposition, published in the Beszelo [samizdat publication] No. 7, 1983)

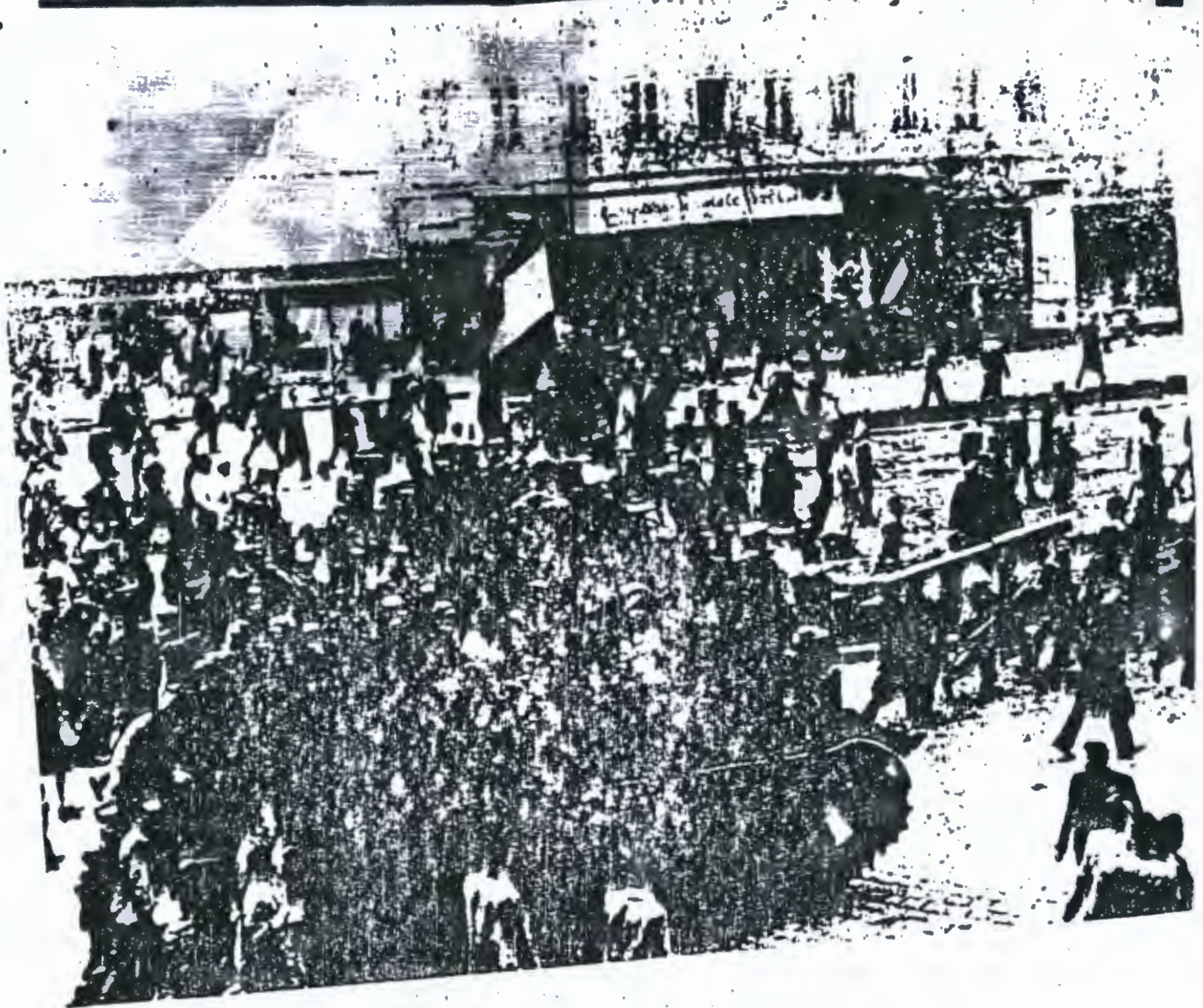
Sandor Racz was born into a poor family in 1933. His father died in World War II, so he had to live on his own from the age of thirteen. He began working as a toolmaker apprentice in the Beloiannisz factory, where he stayed until 1956.

The outbreak of the 1956 Revolution on October 23 found him in the streets of Budapest, speaking to the people against the Soviet occupation. On October 29 the workers of his factory elected a local Workers' Council. He was nominated for presidency but he did not accept the position because he felt too young and inexperienced.

After the Soviets launched their attack to crush the Revolution, the workers continued their efforts to safeguard the achievements of the Revolution. On November 15 they elected the Central Workers' Council (CWC), which represented the Hungarian workers' unanimous demands: the withdrawal of the Russian troops, the restoration of Imre Nagy's government and recognition of the existing workers' councils.

Racz, devoted to these causes, earned the respect of the workers with his determination and personal integrity, which were manifested in several instances. Some of his outstanding actions during those days included: his successful efforts in thwarting the creation of an anti-CWC, backed by the Kadar government; his personal courage when he urged the delegates of the Council to calmly continue discussing the problems while Soviet soldiers stood in the door with loaded machine guns aimed at the Council; his brave and honorable behavior when facing Kadar and his government during negotiations. As a result he was elected president of the CWC. In this position he continued negotiating with the government to gain legal recognition for the workers' councils and to organize the network of the National Workers' Council. As the situation grew worse and the Kadar government gradually took complete control with Soviet assistance, the CWC was outlawed and its members were arrested and persecuted. Racz's last action was to call for the December 11-12 general strike as a response to the shooting of workers in the countryside. On December 11 he was invited to the Parliament by the Central Committee on the pretext of continued negotiations; instead he was arrested. On March 17, 1957 he was sentenced to life and was released only on March 28, 1963 under a general amnesty.

After the harsh years in jail he was unable to find a job--he was turned down everywhere because of his political past. Although he wanted to study, "higher levels" barred him from school. Finally he obtained a job as a toolmaker, working part-time since 1979. His stable monthly income is 650 Forints (\$13) supplemented by income from mushroom and vegetable growing.



## Hungary '56 — the Workers' Case: An Interview with Sandor Racz

### FOREWORD By Bill Lomax

The Hungarian revolution of 1956 was an event of great significance to the Western Left, an event which had a major impact on the attitudes of Western socialists towards the regimes that had been established in Eastern Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War. Closely following the revelations of Nikita Khrushchev's "secret speech" to the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union denouncing the crimes and errors that had been committed under Stalin's rule in the name of socialism, Hungary in 1956 provided the first instance of an entire population rising up against a Communist regime and being suppressed by a Soviet military invasion.

The Hungarian revolution was also of significance, however, because of the leading role played in it by the industrial working class, which not only took part from the very beginning in the revolutionary struggle and played a major role in the fighting, but which also put up the greatest resistance after the second Soviet intervention of 4 November 1956. In the years of terror and repression that followed the crushing of the revolution, it was also from

the ranks of the workers that came the vast majority of those imprisoned and executed.

Yet most published studies of the revolution have concentrated their attention on the role of the intellectuals and political reformists. They were the ones who fled to the West, and they were the ones who wrote about their experiences. Workers generally don't write history books or even their life stories. And because of the closure of the archives, documentation on the workers' role is equally difficult to come by. For this reason the interview that we present here is of particular value. It is with Sándor Rácz, a Hungarian worker who was a young toolmaker only 23 years old in 1956, who had spent all his working life under the postwar regime, and who in 1956 was propelled to the forefront of the revolutionary struggle when he was elected President of the Central Workers' Council of Greater Budapest.

After the revolution Sándor Rácz was arrested, brought to trial and then, on his 25th birthday, sentenced to life imprisonment. Released under the amnesty of 1963, he returned to the workbench and continues to earn his living today as a manual worker. Last year, on the 25th anniversary of his trial and on the occasion of his 50th birthday, Sándor Rácz spoke publicly for the first time about his life and about his activities in 1956 — in an interview with the Hungarian samizdat journal *Beszédo*.

To read this interview is a unique experience. As we do so, we follow Sándor Rácz as he first comes to work in Budapest, as he lives through the social changes of the postwar years on the factory floor, and then to the hopes raised by Imre Nagy's first reform government of 1953. On 23 October 1956 he is there on the streets of Budapest when the statue of Stalin is brought tumbling down, when the fighting breaks out at the radio building and the first Soviet tanks arrive in the city. After the cease-fire of 28 October he returns to the factory and takes an active part in the formation of its workers' council. That's where we find him when the Soviet tanks return at daybreak on 4 November to crush the revolution.

In the ensuing weeks as the workers' councils already formed during the revolution come to play an ever more active role, Sándor Rácz emerges as one of their foremost spokesmen. We see him as he resists the new regime's attempts to trick, divert and manipulate the workers. He soon wins the workers' confidence, and within days of the formation of a Central Workers' Council for the entire region of Greater Budapest, he is elected its President. Now he finds himself in the corridors of power — debating with Government Ministers in the Parliament, negotiating with the Russian Commander-in-Chief at the Soviet military headquarters. But as the movement of workers' councils grows stronger and begins to develop into a national political force, the new Communist regime of János Kádár decides this is a form of workers' power it can do without. The Central Workers' Council is banned, Rácz and his comrades arrested and imprisoned. Then we follow him through the prison cells, through interrogation, trial, hunger strike, and finally, in 1963, to his release.

Sándor Rácz's interview is important not just for the story it tells of the events in which he took part, but also because of the ideas for which he stands. In fact while reading it, one cannot help feeling that one could be reading the account of a working class militant in the early years of the workers' movement in almost any country in the world. Certainly the ideas Rácz stands for are the

traditional ideas which the working class and labour movement has striven to represent from the very earliest times of its existence.

The greatest scandal of the postwar stalinist regime, for Rácz, was the fact that it undermined the workers' unity, the workers' sense of solidarity and fellowship, that should have been the basis of a true workers' power. The years of stalinism are seen by him as a missed opportunity for the workers to take the factories into their own hands and create a society without exploitation. In 1956, however, that opportunity occurred again, and the workers recognised the historical moment. That was why they came to the fore in the revolutionary struggle, and why they were the most steadfast in defence of the revolution's conquests.

The desires and ambitions of the Hungarian workers, however, aroused little enthusiasm amongst the leaders of the Communist regime brought to power by Soviet tanks on 4 November 1956. A system of workers' power based on a national structure of workers' councils, declared the new Party and Government leader János Kádár to a delegation from the Central Workers' Council on 16 November 1956, was "something which didn't exist anywhere in the world" and for which "there certainly wasn't any need in a people's democracy."

For Sándor Rácz and his fellow workers, however, their demands were not vain and idle fantasies, but the desire for a society that would respect the dignity of labour, for a society free from exploitation that would honour and protect those who construct, produce and create. As he himself concludes, it is indeed an immeasurable crime that even today the vision of such a society can find no place in a self-styled people's democracy, and that a working man like Sándor Rácz cannot speak freely and openly in his own country about the struggles in which he and his fellow workers strove to make this vision a reality.

Note

\* *Népszabadság*, Budapest, 17 November 1956.

## Workers' Councils Gave Their Stamp to the Entire Revolution

*(Interview with Sándor Rácz, the President of the Central Workers' Council of Greater Budapest at the time of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956)*

Before coming to our actual theme, the role of the Central Workers' Council, I should like you to tell me something about the road your life took before November 1956, about how you lived and thought until then. Let's begin at the beginning: Where were you born?

I was born at Hódmezővásárhely, on 17 March 1933. My father was a propertyless farm labourer, who married the eighth child of a poor herdsman. When I was six months old I was given to the care of my grandmother at Izsák, because my father didn't want me, while my mother came to Budapest to work in a factory. My father died fighting for his country on 16 September 1942 in the Valley of the Don.<sup>1</sup> So my widowed grandmother looked after me right up to 1946, until I came to Budapest. I was the sixteenth child she had had to bring up, and so in Izsák too I had to work hard to prove my worth.<sup>2</sup>

Did you come to Budapest after your mother?

No. It was just that it was announced in the village that a college was being organised at Budafok for orphan and half-orphan children who wanted to study. Without telling my grandmother, I put my name down for it at the village hall. On 15 August 1946, on the Day of Our Lady, I arrived at the Eastern Railway Station.<sup>3</sup> I had just enough money left to buy a tram ticket to the college, but I got on the wrong tram, and I got lost. I found myself at Máriabesnyő, right in the middle of the festivities. That was my first experience of Budapest — the masses of people, the singing, and the fact that I was standing there alone amid all the commotion I was lost, and I didn't even have enough money to get back to Izsák, because I would much rather have gone back. So it was thanks to my poverty that I stayed in Budapest.

Did you go to work right away at the Beloiannisz factory?

No. I started out as a carpenter, apprenticed to Gyula Polacsek. I was a puny child, some 35 kilos at that time, and I had to take the furniture barrow twice a day between Budafok and the Big Bill furniture store by the Western Railway Station. I only spent one year as an apprentice carpenter, because I became very weak and the doctor forbade me to do any sort of physical work. I looked for lighter work, and so I became a barrel maker's apprentice. Twenty-five of us lived together in the college — Catholics, Protestants and Jews all mixed together. In 1948 they wanted to close the college down, but I suggested that we should stay together. After that I have to work, to work very hard, to support myself, because I am a nobody's nobody. No-one is going to give me a slice of bread, if I don't earn it for myself. But I wanted more than that too. I wanted to study, I wanted to acquire a trade, so I could be my own boss. In 1948 I went to the Standard Works, to what is now the Beloiannisz.<sup>4</sup> I worked for three months as a fettler, and then for two years I was an apprentice toolmaker. As early as 1949 I left the training shop, to work under the master craftsman Konstantin Major, and in September 1950 I was released from my apprenticeship. Then in 1953 I was called up into the army.

Excuse me for butting in, but there is something I would like to ask you. For you and your workmates there in the factory, what was it like to live through the changes as the new system was being built?

You know, somehow or other we really felt every change on our skin. When I first went to the Standard, the 200-man workshop was run by a Social Democrat works' manager with just one lady office assistant. Later on, after the Vogeler and Sanders trial and the uniting of the two parties,<sup>5</sup> they brought in a Communist works' manager, who had very little knowledge of the profession, and the administration immediately started to grow. Of course the old Social Democrat skilled workers didn't let the workplace go completely to the dogs, and there was quite a lot of anger against the bloated-up bureaucracy as well. We were the ones who had to

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support them, and at the same time we could see that the work went better with less time-servers. There was a lot of grumbling, but in the end they remoulded the workplace — though, to tell the truth, it took them two years to do it. The social democratic spirit made for a very strong resistance.

**Were you a member of the Social Democratic Party?**

No. I wasn't a member of either the one or the other. You know, I'm always against anything that would restrict my ability to think freely, that would tie my hands down. Even in the workplace it wasn't the Social Democratic party that was important, but the solidarity, the collective spirit, the fact that each person was concerned for the other, for the work and the life of the one working alongside him. In a word, it was the workers' consciousness that was important. As I see it, in 1948 — and then again, later, in 1956 — we lost the opportunity, that history threw to us for a moment, for the workers to take the factories into their own hands. But that's another question.

**I won't forget about it. But you're right, let's not rush ahead. You mentioned that the 'remoulding' of the workplace took two years. Yet was there any single moment, or any event, that you and your workmates judged as being the point after which something had really changed?**

There was, but — you'll see, it's interesting — somehow this hadn't anything to do with changes in the big world of politics either, this too was something we felt on our skin. It happened towards the end of 1949, when a toolmaker was sacked. And what do you think it was for? You know, it's a custom in the workplace to send an apprentice out to fetch something for lunch. Now on this occasion the lad came back with only a piece of plain bread, and the worker who'd sent him slammed it down on his bench, cursing the lad in some very strong language. He was right — you can't work on dry bread. But he was taken away and given the sack on some pretext or other — being an agitator or something like that. That was how they let us know that a different world had begun.

**Let's stay a moment longer at the workplace. It was here, wasn't it, that you got to know Sándor Bali?**

Yes, after I was moved down to the toolmakers' section. There was just one workbench between us, and we often talked together in the morning break. Bali was ten years older than me, a member of the Communist Party since 1945, a person highly respected in the workplace, and the union steward. As you know, I'm someone who's always grumbling, I've always been a bit of a rebel — but Bali would patiently hear me out, and put my hot-headedness down to my youth. That's another interesting thing — I always had to do my work well for the others to put up with my rebelliousness. The Communist works' manager tried to give me rotten work anyway, that wouldn't pay well and that would make me unpopular into the bargain. He wanted to make me a work calculator, a norm setter, but Bali and his mates didn't allow it. They told him that I was able to do better work than that. But I wouldn't have taken on the norm setting anyway. I made hot moulding dies and deep drawing tools in the workshop, and I was always the one the men working on the machines came to if they needed anything putting right — 'You can trust Sándor, he'll make a good job of it'. So you see, by my work I won for myself some small right to grumble. The way you'd see it, I couldn't officially have been a stakhanovite because, as the works' manager put it, 'I was politically uneducated' — but I received a stakhanovite's pay, because I fulfilled the norms by 180%.<sup>7</sup>

**Were you in the workshop right up to 1956?**

No, because in October 1953 I was called up as a soldier into the Budapest Signals Regiment, and here somehow things began to make sense to me. You know, before then I really had been 'politically uneducated'. I hadn't let them force me into going to all those political courses, I wasn't letting them influence my opinions — but in the army there's no question of avoiding it, here you have to go to the meetings. And so I find myself in conflict



with the lecturers, because I stand up and say to them: 'How is it that the peasant has to have even his last cow taken away from him?' The peasant lads were behind me, because I was speaking the truth for them. And I understood Imre Nagy's aims from his June speech — to free the agricultural workers who'd been ground down into the deepest misery, to mechanise agriculture, to give greater freedom and opportunity to the working man, to put an end to the severity, the suffering of the peasants, and the rule of the AVO.<sup>8</sup> I said all these things in the army too, and somehow things began to become clearer to me.

**When were you discharged?**

In October 1955 I went back to the Beloianisz. Proletarian life began anew. In the factory the world had changed a great deal. One after another the informers had been found out, and they had become the objects of general hatred. For instance, a microphone was spotted in one of the workers' lockers — the bosses used it to listen to what we were talking about while getting changed. After that the lad had to be removed from the workshop, because nobody was willing to work with him. Then in the summer of 1956 I left the Number II workshop for the K I workshop, to work as a toolmaker.

**Was it by then already possible to feel something of what was to come?**

Not half! By then we were already past the Twentieth Congress, we were breathing more freely, even at official meetings we were more outspoken, and amongst ourselves too we talked more openly.<sup>9</sup>

**Did the outbreak of the revolution on 23 October find you in the factory?**

No, because on 5 October I had gone into hospital to have my ton-



sits out. But it was only on the 17th that I had the operation, because I am a haemophiliac and they were afraid to operate. On the 23rd I slip out from the Péterfy Hospital, because I was drawn to the streets by the speeches of Gerő and Piros.<sup>10</sup> I'm unable to speak because of the operation, but the toppling of Stalin gives me back my voice. Today it's difficult for you to imagine, just what an experience it was when the statue came tumbling down. It was the people of Budapest, in whose name the statue had been built, who went there and brought it down. Everybody was your friend there and then on the square. After Old Joe had been brought down, and when just his boots were left standing on the plinth, lorries arrived for us to go to the Radio, because the people were being fired on there.<sup>11</sup> Everyone who could manage to do so, clambered up onto the vehicles. The streets were packed with people, and the city resounded to the echoes of two slogans: 'Russians, Go Home!' and 'Imre Nagy into the Government!'. We weren't able to get to the Radio, so big was the crowd. We stopped at the corner of the Sándor Bródy street and the Museum boulevard. Getting down from the lorry, I somehow found myself next to a girl called Marika — she was with me all evening, we went together everywhere. On the Calvin Square there were cars and trams in flames. Soldiers stood about on the corner — they were from my old regiment, but I didn't go across to them. Then about ten o'clock four Hungarian tanks arrived. They weren't able to go into the street because they were at once surrounded by the people, who jumped up onto them and demanded of their commander: 'What sort of a Hungarian are you then? Who was it that paid for your training? Would you really come against us with tanks?'



## How long were you at the Radio?

I got back to the hospital about midnight. Marika went back with me. In fact it was she who persuaded me to go back, because the doctors had said my wound could easily open up. Later on, by the way, at the time of my arrest, Marika went to see my mother, and in 1963, after my release, we met again a couple of times — but somehow or other nothing came of it. She was a decent girl, a railway worker's daughter, a schoolteacher. You know, it was just that that bothered me — if she'd joined her life to mine, she wouldn't have been allowed to teach. That's why I was rather reluctant about it.

But to get back to the question: about midnight I got back to the hospital. There can't have been many injured there as yet, because they had plenty of time to listen to me. Next day at dawn, about 5 o'clock, I slip out again. I go to the EMKE, and stand on the corner.<sup>12</sup> The crowd is coming and going, and there and then I start to speak to them. I don't remember now, just what I just improvised. Such things for instance as, a tank passes by and I say 'These tanks fire against us, but they were built with our contributions for peace'. There were always some one or two hundred people around me. There were some who said: 'Such people should be arrested!' but others encouraged me to carry on, because I was speaking the truth. I told them that it was the toppling of the statue that had given me back my voice. But after two or three hours I had to go back to the Péterfy, because my throat was still very weak.

## Did you go out again the next day?

Of course, every day. Then on the 28th I finally went home, to Murányi Street. That's something I forgot to tell you: in 1955, when I was released from the army, I bought a windowless warehouse store-room, and from then on I lived there with my mother. That's where I go home on the Sunday, on the 28th. I sleep there, and the next day I go into the factory. After that I don't get to sleep in a bed again until after my arrest, until 11 December. But, that's by the way. Well, on the 29th, there inside the factory, some 500 of us were gathered together in the main hall. We stood around, we talked — there was plenty to talk about. We were in our street clothes; we didn't get changed for work because there were too few of us to start up production. I don't remember now just who it was, but someone suggested we should elect a workers' council. I can't remember either, just who it was who put my name forward. It's enough to say, I too had to go up onto the platform. The provisional workers' council finally came to have fifteen members. We went up from the main hall to the manager's office, and here someone suggested that I should be the president, but I didn't accept. I pointed out my age and my lack of experience — I was 23 years old — and I suggested Sanyi Bali. You know, somehow I felt that to accept such a position would greatly limit what I could do. It would tie me down to the factory, and well, there were all sorts of Communists there, and I didn't want to get into quarrels with anyone. After that I became the person who liaised with the district, and with the other factory workers' councils.

## Who do you remember from the workers' council?

Ferenc Simon, a very decent engineer, and Árpád Opatowszky, an engine fitter. There were two eighteen year olds, spirited youngsters, who weren't actually members but were a great deal of help in the work of the council: Józsa Balogh and Imre Szelvényi. Szelvényi later became a sort of personal assistant to me. He looked after our contacts with the district, with the district workers' council and the other factory ones. If I wanted to speak with anyone I sent messages through him, and he brought in food to me at the factory.

## What were the first measures you took?

While we were still up in the office, we decided we should start work, and organise factory guards. We took it as natural, as a consequence of the revolution, that the manager shouldn't run things, but that we should take over the factory ourselves. The guards wer

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needed to defend the machinery and the materials, and to prevent any suspicious elements getting into the factory. In the afternoon I had two radios and a tape recorder brought in, so we could record the different radio broadcasts, and keep up with what was happening. Then I walked around the factory and, one after another, I took down the decorations — pictures, stars, statues, whatever. I said that anyone who couldn't manage without these things could take them home, but that one doesn't have to have decorations in order to work well. These were my first 'instructions'. I say 'instructions' in quotation marks, because it wasn't necessary to give orders to anyone — everyone knew their job.

But there was one very interesting thing that happened here: how I came to have my own AVO. About 5 o'clock I went down to the street when a young man in a leather coat came up to me and asked after me by name. He asked me to hide him because he was afraid to go home. He was an AVO captain and his wife was Russian. In return he offered to write out the secret Soviet radio broadcasts that in his job as a signalman he had listened to on 28 October. I thought it over. There were a number of secure rooms in the basement. I could take him there, and we would see. I took him with me into the factory, gave him pen and paper, and he got down to work. I locked him in the room. I went back a couple of hours later, and when I read what he had written out, I could hardly believe my eyes. The numbers of soldiers the Russians were mobilising, the troop movements being carried out — these were the sort of things he had written down. I locked him in again, and went to speak with several members of the workers' council. This document was so important that we had to get it to Imre Nagy, because he had to be informed about these things. We went into the Parliament on the morning of 30 October between 10 and 11 — this was the first time I'd been there. About thirty people are waiting around outside Imre Nagy's door. He steps out and is quite taken aback. 'What are you waiting for?' he asks. 'For permission to form parties,' they tell him. Imre Nagy's reply still rings in my ears today: 'Look here. I'm a Communist. I don't organise other parties. As to what parties may be formed, that's a matter for the cabinet to decide.' In the meantime I'd already seen to my mission. I had explained in a couple of words what I had brought, and I'd handed over the AVO captain's notes.

**Excuse me for butting in again, but do you have a copy anywhere?**

No, because only one was made. You know, there was a revolution going on. We didn't have time to think about the historians. But it's possible it exists somewhere — that's your job now, to look for it. Anyway, Imre Nagy then went back into his room, and I started to speak to the other people there. 'Are you out of your minds?' I asked them, 'You've got time to think about organising parties, when there are a thousand other, more important jobs to be done?' There were two journalists from *The Truth* there, and afterwards they took me across to the New York Cafe and interviewed me.<sup>12</sup> It appeared in one of their numbers. That's where you can read my opinion of the multi-party system.

But let me finish the story of my AVO. When I got back to the factory, I found several people hanging around in the basement with the idea of giving this AVO a going over. I put it to them: 'OK, here's the key. As far as I'm concerned you can string him up if you like, but first you'll have to shoot me, because I've given this man my word of honour that he won't be harmed. Just shoot me, then you can have him!' This calmed them down a bit. We sent food for the captain's wife, and he stayed down in the basement for another few days. Finally, on 3 November, we handed him over to the district police station. I understand that, later, he was brought to trial. They threw him out of the AVO, or at least they didn't take him back. I asked for him to be called as a witness at my trial; after all, I had saved his life. But the judge didn't consider that had any significance. Well, maybe it really didn't. I don't know.

**Let's go back to what happened after 29 October. What happened in the workers' council?**

Up till 3 November, nothing, at least nothing important. We got to know one another, the representatives of the workers' councils in the district. We talked, we phoned one another. I lived inside the factory: I slept there, wherever I could — in an armchair, on a

table. The women cooked in the kitchen. They weren't short of anything to cook, because we'd received potatoes, meat and geese from the countryside. That story also belongs to the revolution: the peasants, with bundles on their shoulders, coming to feed the revolution. The workers' councils also paid out advances on wages, to those who came in for them. On 3 November, by the way, when we took my AVO in to the police station, we spent a little time looking around the city. We inspected its peacefulness, as if we were the masters. We went into the Bajza Street, into the area around the Writers' Association and the Soviet Embassy. Everywhere we went we felt the silence, the silence before a storm. We were planning for a return to work on the Monday, and we were curious as to the mood in the city, whether we would be able to come to work. And you know, it wasn't just a coincidence that I wanted to take a look at the Soviet Embassy. Somehow, from the beginning I didn't believe that the Russians would really leave us to enjoy what we had won. Then came 4 November ...<sup>14</sup>

**When you woke up to hear the city being shot to pieces ...**

We weren't woken up by anything, because we hadn't closed our eyes. That silence on the 3rd hadn't been at all to my liking! And I didn't agree with Maléter going into the closed-off Soviet military headquarters either — already in the night the radio had been calling on them to report in.<sup>15</sup> Then at dawn, a little after 4 a.m., Imre Nagy's speech was broadcast on the radio. That's something you can't ever imagine, that tragedy! It was heartbreaking to hear this Communist pleading almost in tears with the Russians not to harm this city, this little country. Even today I can still hear it, because they read it out in Russian as well: 'Nyimanye, nyimanye!' — I don't know what it means, but something like 'Please, please!'. It was only a good hour and a half later that we heard the first gunfire. By 6 a.m. there was nothing but battle.<sup>16</sup>

**Did you and your workmates fight too?**

Not those of us who were in the factory, we didn't. We were twenty in all, without weapons, just the odd pistol — there wouldn't have been much sense in it. I went out onto the factory roof, from where I could see the shells and bombs flying in all directions. We were feeling really desperate and furious. For they had attacked a peaceful and calm country, and just when we were ready to restart production.

**What were you able to do?**

Until the 8th, nothing. For that day we called together a meeting of the district workers' council in the main hall of the small engine and machine factory. About a hundred came along. As a matter of fact, our only aim was to give the people a little hope. We were all of one opinion: that the workers' councils now had an active role to play. Up till then we hadn't intervened in politics, because we trusted Imre Nagy. We saw him as the political guarantee of the revolution, but Kádár and his lot betrayed both Imre Nagy and the revolution as well.<sup>17</sup> At that time everybody was against Kádár. Nobody wanted to have anything to do with him — apart from the couple of people with whom he'd thrown together his Government. For our part, we thought that we had to save as much as we could of the freedoms that we had struggled for. That was our job now.

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*Stalin's statue: the harder they come ...*

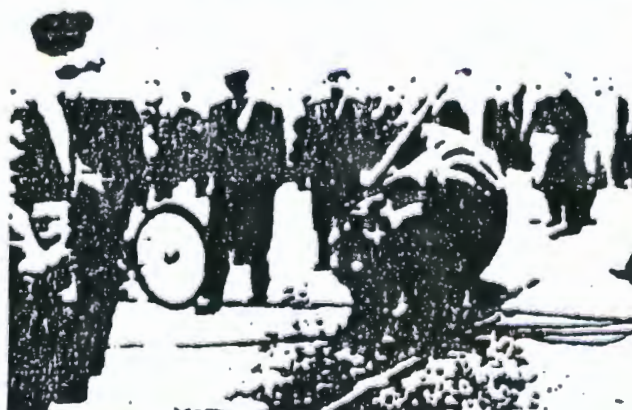
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**At this district meeting, did you agree on any sort of political programme for the future?**

I don't recall there being any demands. On the 12th, by then there definitely were, when we called together the district into the Beloiannisz. But first I'd like to tell about how Sanyi Bali was taken away on 8 November for three or four hours to the Russian military headquarters in a Pobeda, together with the factory manager Bertalan Berecz. This Berecz by the way spent the whole of the revolution inside the factory. He lived on the Gellért hill and he didn't dare to go home — he felt safer with us. (Later, at our trial, they made out that we were a great danger for the cadres — well, anyway.) Berecz got on quite well with Sanyi, and after 4 November he tried to talk both of us into joining the new party.<sup>18</sup> "That's just the place for people like you," he said — and that was just when I was calling for all parties to be banned from factory territory! Towards the end of November they even offered me a villa on the Gellért hill, if I would give up my political activity.

**What went on at the meeting on 12 November? Who came to it, and what decisions were taken?**

People came from the workers' councils in the district. I recognised many of them by sight, because — as I told you — I'd earlier been the liaison man. I was really very active in those days. I may even have opened the meeting, but I don't remember now. I was also concerned by the fact that Sanyi was, after all, a family man,



*... the harder they fall*

and he'd already been taken away once by the Russians. So far as I could, I saw to as much as possible myself. That was when it was, by the way, that the political demands were drawn up: for the withdrawal of the Soviet troops, the return of the Imre Nagy Government, legal recognition of the workers' councils and revolutionary committees, those sorts of things. Some four or five of the delegates made these demands up into a list, upstairs in the office, and then we voted for them from the platform. This is important, because on the 14th Sanyi Bali had this already prepared programme to take with him to the *Egyesült Izzó*, to the founding meeting of the Central Workers' Council.<sup>19</sup>

**Were you not there in the Izzó?**

No, because only the presidents were called there. Sanyi told me about it, about the formation of the Central Workers' Council, later, at daybreak on the 15th, when he returned from the delegation to the Parliament. That's how I came to learn about it, from him.<sup>20</sup>

**When did you get involved in the work of the Central Workers' Council?**

Hang on a bit! Don't rush things, because there's something that happened here that's rather important. Already on the evening of the 14th, Sándor Sz. Nagy, the mill operator at the Ganz factory, had got in touch with our workers' council to tell us that he had called a meeting of workers' councils for the next day in the Koltói street at the headquarters of the Steelworkers' Union, and we should also send representatives.

On the 15th I asked Sanyi for them to send me, because I had a feeling that there was something odd about it. So I went along. The meeting started about 10 a.m., and I was unhappy from the start that the mood was so very formal. There were about 400 people in the hall. Those seated on the platform were all toggled up — white shirts and all that — while I and the rest there in the hall, we were wearing our workers' clothes, what we go to work in. But no matter, I thought, let's wait and see what goes on. I'm standing at the back, at the end of the hall. Up front the first contributor is speaking, a tall, lanky young man. But he's talking a lot of nonsense. He thinks the workers' demands of the 14th are unsatisfactory and ill-willed. At this point I go forward, between the two rows of chairs, up to the table. I stand behind the young man, and wait for him to finish what he has to say. Then, very loudly, I ask if he'll be kind enough to introduce himself, to tell us just who or what he is, and whom he represents. It turned out that he was a university student, that two people he didn't know had been to see him, and asked him to come here and say what he's said. So now it's my turn to explain what's going on. I turn towards the hall, I give my name and explain that I'm from the Beloiannisz. I tell them that there's no need for this meeting, because the Central Workers' Council of Greater Budapest has already been formed at *Izzó*. "There's no need for a counter workers' council," I tell them, "and I'm leaving the hall. If anyone's interested in the real programme of the Central Workers' Council, they can find out about it at Akácfa street no. 15." So I go out of the hall, down to the street, and wait. Ten minutes later the crowd starts to straggle out after me. All right then, I think, and I ask a lad on a motorbike to take me across to the Akácfa street, to the Budapest Tram Company's building.<sup>21</sup>

Here again something interesting happened. I arrived at the door to the first floor meeting room at just the same moment as Tibor Déry, who was bringing the greetings of the Writers' Association.<sup>22</sup> He was the elder, he went in first. As I waited outside, the 400 people from the Koltói street arrived. Then I went in. I explained what had happened, and I suggested they should give a report about the Central Workers' Council to these 400 people. Pista Babay opened up the big room on the fourth floor for this, so we could all get in.<sup>23</sup> He had hardly started to speak when two Russian soldiers appeared at the door. Once again I was sitting at the back, and I clearly heard them lifting the safety catches on their machine guns. Everyone turned round to look, and Fazekas got up from the platform to go towards them — but they pointed their machine guns at him, for him to go back to his place.<sup>24</sup> The air froze, and an atmosphere of panic almost broke out. Then I think to myself: "Well, we can't leave, so we might as well get on with

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what we've come here for." I stand up. I can feel the two guns pointed at my back, but I go up towards the table, and I start to speak: "Just because there are two Russian soldiers with loaded weapons standing here in the doorway, we still have to talk about the problems of the Hungarian workers!" Things calmed down and the two soldiers too disappeared from the doorway.

**So that's how you came to get involved in the Central Workers' Council?**

Not quite. Szélvényi had gone there earlier on, and was waiting for me in the stairway. He'd brought the 11th district's resolution with him, so I'd be able to represent the district. (You know, each district had a delegate.) But it's true, that with my latest speech I'd already taken the second step forward. The first step had been in the Koltői street, when I prevented the counter workers' council being formed. This was the second step, when I saved the situation from the Russians. And so after these events, I step out from the unknown. In my view this was what counted, and not what Bill Lomax writes, that Rácz was the most outspoken representative of the workers' demands.<sup>25</sup> It wasn't the loudness that counted, but something else. There was another aspect to this incident. A little later József Sándor turned up at the meeting — he was the Kádár lot's liaison man with the Central Council — and he said there had been a misunderstanding with the Russians, and he expressed apologies on the Government's behalf.<sup>26</sup> I don't believe that it was a misunderstanding, because as we later discovered, everyone who was in the corridor had been forced into the large hall, while the building has been surrounded by tanks. Of course, there might have been some misunderstanding ...

**After this, you became a member of the Central Council?**

Yes. I presented my credentials, they were accepted, and I sat down. There were more people there, by the way, than just one representative for each district, but only one delegate per district could vote.

**Was Sándor Bali there too?**

No, he wasn't. Look, I know that Bali is more acceptable to you historians than I am. You say — at least that's all I've read so far — that he tried to influence me, because I was such a hot-head. But that isn't how it was. Bali, Rácz: we were as one; at least in 1956 that's how it was. Earlier, in the fifties, when he restrained me, he only did so out of concern for me.

**What happened at this meeting of the Central Council?**

We talked with József Sándor, and agreed to send a delegation to the Parliament. About ten people were chosen for the delegation, me amongst them. This was already a bit more than I was prepared for. After all I was the very youngest of them! But I'm sure that what played a large part in it — as I've said — was my two earlier appearances.

**When did you meet with the Government?**

It had been agreed with József Sándor that the meeting would be at 8 o'clock in the evening, but Kádár only turned up around midnight. Till then he kept us waiting. He wanted to tire us out. But that wasn't the only reason. You know, it was the first time I'd been in the Parliament — and under what circumstances! I was young too, and I had no particular wish to be the centre of attention, but I paid attention to what was going on. And so I saw just why it was they kept us waiting. They drove us into the meeting room, and in come several members of the Government — it's about 8 o'clock this happens — in comes Biszku, Ribánsky, Sándor József, Marotán, those sort of people.<sup>27</sup> You've hardly noticed them arrive, when there's one sitting to your right, one to your left, and they're pumping questions at you — just what actually is it that we want? Then they vanish as unexpectedly as they'd come, and Kádár knows in advance what questions he's going to be asked. All the same, I didn't give away very much to them, that's for sure. Well, come midnight and in comes Kádár. You know, the agreement was for our talks to be directly transmitted by the radio,

but in comes Kádár, steps up to the table and pushes the mike aside, saying, "I can speak without this!" So he tore up our prior agreement. In my opinion, after that we should have got up and left — but our president, Dévényi, didn't behave in a way befitting a working man. He swallowed, he whined, he stuttered, he wrung his hands — in a word, he was quite pitiable.<sup>28</sup>

**Wasn't any agreement reached?**

Agreement? Quite the opposite! I'll tell you what it was in a moment, but first there's something else. You know, we were negotiating in the prime minister's quarters, in the wing overlooking the Margaret bridge; the meeting room is parallel to the Danube. Well, after Kádár has pushed aside the microphone, Dévényi is still stuttering, and the blathering's already been going on for about an hour, then we hear gunfire from the side of the Danube. Then I feel that I have to say something. I stand up and I tell them: "We're blathering away here like old women at the market, while out there on the street Hungarian workers are being shot down, and no-one here in this room feels any responsibility!" At this Kádár leaps up, declaring that he won't put up with such a tone. Biszku tries to quieten him: "Leave it, Comrade Kádár, he's just a naive child." Well, it could be I was naive, but I was speaking the truth. After that the atmosphere got even worse, and the negotiations were broken off. In the break we were surrounded by journalists and radio reporters, and a miners' delegation from Salgótarján who were also taking part in the negotiations, and we talked a lot. So this was the third of those moments — at least that's how I feel — that pulled Sándor Rácz out of the unknown, and which later led him to become the Central Workers' Council's president.

**What happened after the break?**

I don't remember whether the negotiations were continued, or what was discussed. At dawn we got a car, and I went back to the factory, to Fehérvári street no. 70. A Central Council meeting had been announced for 8 o'clock in the morning. Here, after Dévényi's account, I asked to speak, and I told them what had happened in the Parliament. Then I put forward a motion of no confidence in Dévényi — because in my opinion he hadn't behaved in a way befitting a worker — and at the same time I criticised the behaviour of the entire delegation. A hard debate began. Those around fifty tended to speak up in favour of Dévényi, feeling that he would achieve something with his bargaining, but those under forty took up a more radical position. (Just so that you should know: at that time and for a good time afterwards the man in the street, everybody, was against Kádár and his lot.) Then we had a secret ballot to choose a new president, and it turned out that, apart from myself, everyone voted for Sándor Rácz. I was taken aback. This wasn't what I had wanted to achieve with my motion of no confidence, but I accepted, because I felt that I had to. The vice-president was György Kalocsai; the secretary Pista Babay.<sup>29</sup> It later turned out that Babay had at one time been some sort of minor nyilas<sup>30</sup> — although in my "inaugural address" on becoming president I had called on everybody's good faith: "This isn't a game, our lives are at stake, so if there's anyone who did anything before 1956 that could compromise the integrity of the Central Workers' Council, then it would be better if they didn't take part. Because we will be examined under a magnifying glass!" Dévényi withdrew anyway, because he was offended. From then on we weren't able to get on at all with Csepel, which in my view was because of that.<sup>31</sup> János Fazekas was voted out as well. After this my own influence in the Central Council became stronger, and the grovelling behaviour was left behind.

**What ideas did the Central Council's new leadership have?**

First of all, that we should return to work, bring the men back into the factories. (It was the 11th district workers' council that first put this forward, but I was thinking along the same lines as well.) We couldn't allow Kádár's lot to be the ones to give work and bread to the workers, because then they would manipulate them. If the Central Workers' Council could bring the men back to work, back into the factories, then it would be strengthening its own position as well — that was the idea. The workers' councils also had to be re-elected. (Kádár's lot were always going on about the workers'



*Armed workers patrol city streets early in the insurrection*

councils not being valid, because the workers weren't there in the factories — as if they, on the other hand, had been elected by public acclamation...) Then afterwards on the 16th we went with this plan, with leaflets calling for a return to work, to the Parliament for more negotiations. I read out the appeal on the radio; at that time the studio was there, inside the parliament building. It was on this occasion that Antal Apró came up with the suggestion for three members of the Central Council to be appointed to the Government.<sup>12</sup> To that I replied: "What are you thinking? You think that's why they sent me here, to haggle over ministerial positions?? It would be better if you would reply to my questions: When are the Soviet troops going to leave? When will Imre Nagy return to lead the Government, and when will the workers' councils be given legal recognition?"

**Wasn't there any friction between you and the Soviet troops?**

Look, at that time lots of people were being deported. We had a three-member rescue committee, and they went regularly to the Russian headquarters to save people from deportation. Later they arranged a meeting with General Grebennik, the Commander-in-Chief. That was later, after 23 November, after the demonstration of silence, because I remember well that it was just then that three Soviet military historians came along to a meeting of the Central Workers' Council, accompanied by József Sándor, to get to know our standpoint.

I remember one of them going down into the street at noon, and coming back almost in tears on seeing how this city, where even at night life was colourful, had become dead for an hour. There wasn't a soul in the streets, because the Central Workers' Council had called on the people to demonstrate in this way on the first month's anniversary of the revolution. It was a couple of days after that that I went along to the Dürer Ajtósi Róka, to what used to be the building of the Party School, and where the Soviets now had their central headquarters. This was also an interesting picture: Grebennik and the other Russian officers with the Kossuth emblem stitched on their jackets — you know, just like everybody was wearing during the revolution — and when the duck was served with seed-cake, he sent back the cake, saying he'd have it with bread like the Hungarians. Grebennik was good-natured towards us, and I accepted to eat dinner with him, because I didn't want to offend the foreigner's sense of hospitality. Incidentally, there was also another reason why I went to see them, because I didn't want

them — and through them, Moscow — to get their information only from Kádár's lot. I thought, I'll tell them sincerely what it is we want — after that, let anyone else tell them whatever they like. We met with some success as well, in reducing the deportations and getting the curfew restrictions made a bit less severe. After that I went another two times to their headquarters. On one occasion I spoke with a huge Tatar or Mongol; the second time with a stocky Russian, I think he was Serov.<sup>13</sup> They were no longer quite so friendly.

**How did you envisage building up a nationwide structure of workers' councils?**

The National Workers' Council was never formed. We called together the delegates of workers' councils from the whole country to a conference in the Sports Stadium for 8 o'clock on the morning of 21 November. They came as well, several hundred of them — but the Stadium was so heavily surrounded by Soviet tanks that not even a mouse could have got in. Then we went across to the MÉMOSZ headquarters<sup>14</sup>, but they didn't let us in there either, and so some 60 or 70 of us went over to the Atacfa street. Only one or two of the provincial delegates got into the small hall, and for that reason alone we couldn't really go ahead with forming the National Workers' Council. But I had been hoping a bit that when it was formed I would no longer have to be president. True though, by that time no one was really fighting for positions; the ropes were already tightening in around us. Well anyway, we decided to protest with a two-day strike, on 22-23 November, against the prevention of the meeting, and against the kidnapping of Imre Nagy.<sup>15</sup> The significance of the strike appeal was that only two days earlier we had brought the men back into the factories; now we were already calling them out on strike. This once again proved the strength of the Central Workers' Council.

**Did you have any contacts with Imre Nagy and his colleagues?**

No, because we didn't go in to the Yugoslav Embassy. We didn't want to make their already complicated diplomatic situation any more difficult. But we learned of their kidnapping. And, on the 21st we went again to the Parliament... But there's something I'd forgotten to mention: I'd already told them in the Central Workers' Council executive that a lot of people were saying I was too young, perhaps too hot-headed, maybe they should elect someone else in my place. But again it was me they elected, and I

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was again the one to go to negotiate. We came to an agreement on two things in the Parliament: that they should issue a decree recognising the Workers' Councils and the Greater Budapest Central Council, and that they should provide us with premisses. On one of the preceding days Jenő Fock had already been to see us to discuss the draft decree which he had brought with him, because there was to be a cabinet meeting and he had to prepare for it. We spent the whole day working on the draft. We agreed on a final version, and we even kept a copy ourselves — but then on the 22nd it was none other than the original, uncorrected version that was published as the Government's decree.<sup>36</sup>

## What changes did you make to the Government's draft?

For the posts of factory management to be filled by competition, and for the workers' council to have the power to dismiss the manager — those sorts of things. But it was already clear that you're wasting your time sitting down to negotiate with the Government — they don't take any notice, they just spit in your face. Incidentally, as I understand it, these "changes" are by now the Government's programme.

## Let's wait to see what really comes of it, Sándor...

Well, I don't know. There won't really be workers' councils, that much is already clear.

## And what became of your other request, for premisses?

At first they wanted to give us a place in the Ministry of Agriculture, but I wasn't having that: we weren't a ministry! Of course, the real reason I had in mind was that if we got a place in such a large building, it would be easy for them to keep their eyes on us. I picked out a building that stood on its own in the Andrassy street, but they also realised that in there we'd be able to shut them out whenever we wanted, and so they wouldn't give it us. Finally, on 3 December, we were given some rooms on the fifth floor of the MÉMOSZ headquarters building, on the György Dózsa street.

## What happened after the decree on workers' councils?

The Government invited the workers' councils' presidents and the factory managers to a conference on 25 November.<sup>37</sup> Sanyi Bali went to this, because I was in Veszprém, at a meeting to form a county workers' council. They had sent a message, asking me to take part in their founding meeting. I went down in the factory's Packard. I was in a pretty embittered mood, and I was quite honest with them, as to the sort of game the Government was playing with us. I went along to another workers' council's meeting as well. The factory's Obuda Red Star works sent a message that they were having problems with the workers' council there, because they were all Communists in it, and they weren't doing what the workers wanted. I went there and I called the men together. I expressed my thanks for the work done so far by the workers' council, and I told them: now elect the ones that you want. In less than ten minutes I had the whole election sorted out. Well, I come back from Veszprém, and on the 27th there's yet another meeting with the Government. This time I lead the delegation. They take us into the meeting room, where an oval table has been laid for dinner. Kádár's wife and another woman are bustling about, serving fried liver. I sit down on the sofa beside the wall, take out of my knapsack the cheap sausage and bread that Szelvényi had pressed into my hands earlier in the morning, and I take a snack on my own. I'm not accepting this dinner, the one offered by Kádár's lot. In the meantime Marosán comes in and begins to splutter away: "Well, the famous steelworkers! We bakers are baking the bread, while the famous steelworkers are out on strike. Not everyone who wears overalls is necessarily a worker..."<sup>38</sup> But nobody took any notice of him, and he disappeared back into his room. At 11 o'clock Kádár came in, and I weighed in with my questions: "What is Mr. Kádár's opinion about what has been happening? The kidnapping of Imre Nagy, the strike, the arrests of workers...?" At this he jumps up, saying it's more than his nerves can take. This time I hadn't let him have us questioned in advance; he hadn't been able to prepare, and so the smile wilted from his face. After that, that was indeed the end of the meeting.

## Didn't you have any further negotiations?

We did, once more, on 6 December. But by then our relations with the Government had become very embittered. The Communist Party was also getting organised by then, while the Central Workers' Council too was getting ever stronger. We had set up sub-committees: the press and information section under Miklós Sebestyén, the organisational group led by Ferenc Töke, a group concerned with economic questions, and some others.<sup>39</sup> On the 28th we wanted to publish the *Workers' News*, edited by Gyula Obersovszky.<sup>40</sup> The proofs were already being run off, when József Sándor telephoned to say that the Government would regard it as a hostile step. "All right," I reply, "We'll stop it printing then — We'll show you our good faith."



Talks: student leaders put their demands

So only a stencilled *Information Bulletin* was published. There were three issues, if I remember well; the last of them, maybe, on 6 December.<sup>41</sup> There's something else that happened at this time that I consider very important. A grey-haired man came to see me even today I don't know his name — and gave me a 40-page typed text of a plan for recovery. It was concerned mainly with economic questions, but touched on political issues too. At the time of their arrest they took it away from my office, and it is mentioned in János Molnár's book as the economic programme of the Central Workers' Council. Well, it wasn't originally our programme, a nothing ever came of it, but we were in agreement with most of us and we wanted to put it forward for debate, but we never got as far as that.<sup>42</sup>

## What were the main ideas of this programme?

Such things, for instance, as for unprofitable enterprises to be liquidated and handed out to the workers... In other words, what is nowadays virtually the Government's programme.

## What further moves were there in your struggles with the Government?

First of all, they tried very hard to get us to work together with the trade unions. SZOT delegations had visited Yugoslavia well before 23 October, and they had worked out a draft plan for workers' councils on the basis of their experiences there. But I didn't want to see the workers' councils subordinated to the SZOT, and there was no way I wanted to have anything to do with Sándor Gáspár. He had already had his chance as a trade union leader in the Rákóczi era. But they put a lot of pressure on us to co-operate with the unions.<sup>43</sup>

The other issue was the two demonstrations: the women's demonstration, and the demonstration in support of the Government on 6 December. Incidentally, the women's demonstration on 4 December didn't have the prior authorisation of the Central Workers' Council, because many people said it would serve as provocation — they would be fired upon, and afterwards they would be held responsible. I didn't agree with that, but I had to accept the wishes of the majority. In the end the demonstration was

very moving and beautiful. The women and the girls marched to the grave of the unknown warrior in Heroes' Square. When they got there they took out national flags from under their coats and unfurled them, and then each one placed a flower on the grave. By the end it was covered in a whole mountain of flowers. There were so many flowers, that the flags with the Soviet emblem cut out could be stood up in the middle. We praised the women in the *Information Bulletin*, to make up for not having supported them in advance. The other demonstration, the Communist one, was on the 6th. They marched out on to the streets, singing and carrying red flags, and arrived in front of the Western Railway Station about 4 o'clock, just when the workers from Angyalföld and Újpest were getting there — they gave the demonstrators a good thrashing.<sup>44</sup> At the time, on the afternoon of the 6th, we were in the Parliament where we'd gone with our *Memorandum*. Kádár's lot wanted to blame us for the disturbances. "Hold it a minute!" I said, "It's whoever permitted the demonstration who's responsible for the provocation!" It was too soon for demonstrations in support of the Government, for marching out under red flags! The Government's reply to our *Memorandum* was supposed to be broadcast on the radio the following day, the 7th, but not a word about it came from Kádár's lot.<sup>45</sup>

We called a delegate conference of the National Workers' Council for 8 December. Ferenc Töke organised it, and I was the only one to know about the arrangements, because we had learned from our earlier experiences. The conference began at 9 o'clock in the morning, in the *MÉMOSZ* headquarters. I didn't go in, because the Central Council had taken the view that I shouldn't preside, because I might influence the delegates. (I've forgotten to tell you: on 6 December I asked the Central Council to vote again on who should be the president, because many people were saying I was inflexible and insulting with the Government, that it wasn't possible to negotiate with me — but once again I was the one they elected.) Anyway, the meeting begins, and then about 10 o'clock József Sándor rings up, saying don't you dare to hold the conference, because the Government is very much against it. I tell him that I'm here in the office, and I don't know whether there's any such meeting or not. Then about noon there's another, a far more important phone call: in Salgótarján they're firing on the workers, more than 50 are dead.<sup>46</sup> I immediately called the delegate from Salgótarján out from the conference, and asked him if he knows such and such a person, and if he's reliable. (I didn't tell him straight away why I was asking him this, because I first wanted to check the facts.) The delegate said the person phoning was completely reliable, so I rang up the Soviet headquarters, and then the Government as well, and asked them who was responsible for the shooting. I didn't get any replies to my question. I went into the hall, where there'd already been several people asking: "Where is Sándor Rácz? Why isn't he here?" I go up in front of the platform, and explain why I'm not the one presiding, and I give them the news that's come from Salgótarján as well. The mood in the hall was tense already — I could feel it. People got up to speak one after another, and then unanimously accepted a proposal for a 48-hour strike. But we ordered a ban on any news about the decision until 8 a.m. on the morning of the 9th, lest the delegates be picked up while travelling home. The Central Council also drew up an appeal to the workers of the world, asking them to support the Hungarian workers in their struggle for a life without fear. It was later reported in the world's press. As a matter of fact, the strike of 11-12 December and the appeal were the last things we did. We didn't have anything left to say to Kádár's lot who, in place of negotiating with us, had fired on us. You know, it's my feeling that the Central Workers' Council of Greater Budapest put its stamp on the whole revolution, showing that this wasn't an uprising of hooligans, but of the workers.

*After that you were arrested...*

Yes, in the Parliament. Bali and Rácz were summoned to the Parliament on the 11th in the name of the Government, or rather the Central Committee. (The other members of the Central Workers' Council were by then already under arrest, while the Central Council had been banned. We stayed inside the factory for two days — they didn't dare come for us there). Then on the 11th Bertalan Berecz comes in to see us, along with the Party secretary

for Baranya county — I don't remember his name — and asks us to go to the Parliament. We argued with them for several hours, because we were unwilling to go — I knew what we could expect. It wasn't that I wanted to hide, because then too, just as today, I accepted the responsibility for what I had done, but I felt better in the factory — if I was so important for them, then let them come for me there. In the end, we went with them anyway. The corridors of the Parliament were packed with people, which wasn't usual, but by then I was no longer surprised by anything. Berecz spoke with the man on the door for a couple of minutes — that hadn't happened before — then he comes over to us and explains he has to go for a pass (passes hadn't been needed before). "O.K." I say, "We'll wait here". As the door opens, I see two black cars pulling up in front of the building. Several chinless youths get out of them, and start asking to see people's papers. I turn round to one of them: "I'm Sándor Rácz, I'm the one you've come for. There's no need to carry on with this identity checking." At this he says that they had indeed come for me — and they're already taking me out to the car. One of them pushes his machine gun into my side. "There's no need for that," I tell him, "I'll go without that." "Hold your cheek, laddie, just get moving!" he replies — in other words, the usual AVO manners. Sanyi is bundled into the other car, and we're taken across the Margaret bridge to the Fő street prison. It was a gorgeous morning, the sun was shining...

*They took Ball to the same place?*

Yes, but he was let out a few days later, and they only pulled him in again in March. Just so you'll see what kind of man he was, you should know that they told him that if he would give evidence against me, they'd let him free — but he wasn't prepared to do that, even though he had a wife and two little children waiting for him at home. They gave him twelve years.



*Flying the flag: workers rally to revolution*

*How long were you in the Fő street prison?*

For nine months; then I was taken to the Markó street jail. That's where I got my number: 50-834 (Try it on the lotto — it might bring you luck!)<sup>47</sup> The first thing I did in the Fő street was to sleep the clock round for two days — I hadn't seen a bed since 28 October. My first interrogator was Lieutenant Sándor Kása — I told him everything, just as I'm telling you now, there was nothing to deny. Then someone called Izler — at least that's how he was known — continued my interrogation. He even pressed a picture of the 1st May procession under my nose, saying "Well, Rácz, fuck it, what is it the workers want? You're rotting away here, while your workers, they're applauding." I spent a month in solitary as well. I

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had time to think about the revolution, because during the events I didn't really have time for such things.

**What conclusions did you come to?**

Well, lots of things, but above all to the conviction that the revolution would have succeeded even if they were to execute the whole lot of us — because it showed just how much force, and what means, had to be used to crush it! Anyway I really expected to be executed — though I hadn't delivered a blow to anyone, I hadn't taken tuppence from anybody — because the parliamentary Communists hated me so much because of the way I behaved. I couldn't believe they would leave me alive. Neither during my trial nor since have I ever denied the revolution. It went under that name in my trial record too. And after all Death is no enemy to me, as I'm a religious man.

**There's something I'd like to ask you about, Sándor. I've often heard it said — though, to tell the truth, I've heard the opposite too — that in 1956 there were anti-semitic slogans ...**

Look, that's quite simply not true; at least I never came across anything like that amongst the workers. It's true that there was indeed a very strong feeling against the AVO and against the apparatus, and it's certainly true that these were packed out with Jews — but the non-Jewish AVO was hated just as much as the Jewish one. And after all, how many Jewish fellow prisoners could I list to you, who were far better than many others? Look, if someone knows his job, and if he's acceptable as a person, then he's OK by me. For me, that's the measure. For instance, there was an elderly Jewish rate-fixer at our place — he was very decent, because he left us to get on with our jobs. And it was a Jewish lad who first told me about the Petöfi Circle.<sup>48</sup> In fact this same youngster asked me to go with him to the West on 6 November. He was sure his uncle would be able to fix me up with something; but I didn't go because I had things to do here. Anyway, it was the younger ones who stood on our side, on the side of the revolution. The older ones were no longer very keen to get involved — they'd had their share of bad historical experiences. The more reasonable Jews, however, should have felt some responsibility for the situation after 1945 — amongst the Jews who'd been deported and then later came back, there were some who were prepared to use just as extreme methods as had been used against them. But in my opinion, one crime doesn't justify another.

**When was sentence passed on you?**

On 17 March 1958, on my twenty-fifth birthday. Life. At first they had wanted to stage a really big trial — with 86 defendants, all the workers' council activists whom they'd rounded up. But later they separated them up — which was fortunate, because in such a monster-trial at least ten death sentences would have been handed out. So it came to be Rácz, Bali, József Nemeskéri, László Abód and Endre Mester — this was the workers' council trial.<sup>49</sup> There's one further interesting thing about it — how we finally escaped the rope. After our sentences, we had appealed, but then one day Marika Bali gets a phone call: "They're getting the rope ready for the workers' council activists; they should withdraw their appeals!"

To understand this, you have to know that under the new laws for the people's courts brought in after the revolution, even if the prosecution hadn't appealed for a stiffer sentence, the judge could increase the sentence on appeal. We'd originally been given twelve years, and life, but we'd appealed. After the phone call Marika wrung her hands, because she couldn't think of any way of getting the news to Sándor. At that time they weren't letting anybody, not even relatives or lawyers, in to see us. Someone advised her to say she wanted to have the children adopted — they couldn't refuse her a visit for that. So Marika gets to come in for a visit, and she tells Sanyi that she's going to have the children adopted, if he agrees. Sándor went pale. He lost his temper. "You bitch!" he said to her, "How can you think of such a thing!" Never in his entire life had he used such language to his wife. Marika then begins, very slowly and quietly, to explain to him: "You must understand, Sándor, it's possible that tomorrow you'll no longer be here ..." Hearing this, the wren immediately jumps up, and puts an end to



*Workers power: popular version ...*

their talk. They lead Sándor away, but he calls back: "Thank you Marika, thank you!" Marika calls after him: "All five of you mind!" So it comes about that at the next session, when the prosecutor asks whether we are proceeding with our appeals, or whether we accept the original judgement, we get up one after another to withdraw our appeals. The judge would have strung the lot of us up. That was a time when they were very free in handing out the rope — you know, it always depended on just who had most recently been to visit the Government and why.

**Where were you taken after the Fö street?**

To the national prison at Vác. That's interesting too — how they took me to Vác. They stuck me on my own into the prison van, and sat an armed guard next to me. At other times they had always kept the prisoners separated from the armed guards. During the journey we stop once at a petrol station, and they ask me to pass down the empty petrol cans from the van — the door of the prison van is wide open in front of me. You know, I had the feeling that they were counting on me trying to escape, and they they could have finished me off. We finally arrived at Vác, and I was put on the ground floor. A couple of days later they put Imre Mécs in with me — we'd both been at the technical university at the same time. He was also doing life, although at first he'd been sentenced to death. So we sat there in the cell, two twenty-five-year-old lifers and yet we couldn't take it all seriously — after all, you couldn't really, not in your right mind. I remember Imre teaching me maths. One of the problems he set me still rings in my ears: "How would a spider make its way across the wall, if it wanted to get by the shortest possible route from one corner of the cell to the corner diagonally opposite?" It's unforgettable that one because, you know, there are no spiders in the cells. Everywhere people live spiders live too, but not in the cells.

**How long were you at Vác?**

Until the hunger strike in April 1960. I should mention that I got special treatment there too. They didn't let me go to work





... and official version

although they could have made good use of me in the button factory, and I was kept under the strictest supervision. The hunger strike took place after the restricted "cadres" amnesty of 1960. It may seem insulting to those released then, but it's no less true, that the only people released were those who were well-known.<sup>50</sup> But try to understand: what we protested against wasn't that they were released, but that we, the rest of us, were kept inside. For that, the entire prison went spontaneously on hunger strike. They wanted to hold Old Pista Bibó and Arpi Göncz responsible for organising the strike — they said they were trying from there, from inside the prison, to overthrow the state, the people's republic.<sup>51</sup> It's enough to say that on the third night of the strike they rounded us up from the cells, and packed us to overflowing — we couldn't either budge or breathe — into six prison vans. There was a needle-sized hole in the roof of our van, and at dawn one of us managed to get a glimpse through it of the town we were being driven through. It was Miskolc. That really got us worried that they might be taking us out of the country, because then we would really be in for it. Finally, however, we were let out into the yard of the prison at Sátoraljaújhely, and each van-load was put in a separate cell. I found myself together with Old Pista Bibó, Ferenc Mérei, Jenő Szell, Pista Marián and some others.<sup>52</sup> The months that followed were hard ones, in almost total isolation, and it was only slowly that things began to improve. Some time later sixteen of us were one day lined up to be taken away. When they brought the chain, to chain us up, I asked them to leave that out. "We're workers," I said, "We've accepted the responsibility for what we've done, what we've been sentenced for. We're not going to try and escape" — but they still chained us up together all the same. When they chained us up, we started to sing with our full lungs the *International*, and we raised our voices most of all when we got to the line that goes: "And the last fight let us fight!" The screws scurried around all over the place, and finally it was like this, chained up together and singing, that they packed us into the prison van. We kept on singing all the way through the town, and we only stopped when we reached the main road.

## Where were you taken?

They brought us to Budapest, to the *Gyűjtő*, the central prison. They needed toolmakers in the toy factory, and they put us to work there. Incidentally, as I was being punished with loss of privileges, I wasn't allowed to buy extra food from outside and have it sent in, and so my mates gave me bits and pieces — that they took from their own mouths. It bothered me a lot, to be kept in such a situation. I wrote a letter to the prison governor, saying that if they have me doing physical work, then they should let me have food sent in too. They shouldn't expect me to work my bones to the marrow, nor to have to eat other people's share. The answer — thirty days on strict rations. You know what that is? One day half rations, the next day just water. After the thirty days were up I was again banned from work, and into the bargain they stuck me in amongst spies. It was only sometime in 1961 that they allowed me to work again. We had to remove stamps from envelopes for selling to stamp collectors, and to sort them out into little packets. Here I got the chance to talk a lot with Old Pista Bibó, while we were removing the stamps. Later on they moved me to the carpentry workshop. I had a bit of bother there too, because they wanted to use my work as a standard for setting norms, but I didn't let them. After all, I had once been an apprentice carpenter, and I could handle the tools better than the others — so I didn't allow it. Another thing about my time at the *Gyűjtő*: it was there that I completed my eighth year of schooling. In 1956 with seven years schooling behind me I defended the cause of the Hungarian workers, and then in the prison I have teachers like Professor Mérei and György Litván.<sup>53</sup> In 1967 after my release I completed my schooling at night school. I didn't apply there first, but to the Donáth Bánki technical school but they rejected me, on orders from above. I wanted to go to University too, but that wasn't the way my life was to be. It was only prisons they built for me, not universities.

## When were you released?

In the big amnesty of 1963, on 28 March.<sup>54</sup> I wanted to go back to the factory, to the Beloiannisz, but they wouldn't let me. After that some 25 large factories returned my cards, until I finally got work with a private toolfitter. True, it wasn't in my real trade, but as a fitter, but then I had to find some means of earning a living. Finally on 3 August I got taken on as a toolmaker at the Telecommunications Cooperative where I still work today, though since 1979 only as an outworker.

## Why have your connections with the Cooperative got so loose? Do you come out better financially, or what...

Look, there's more than one reason for that. The first is that my family lives at Izsák. It was in Izsák that I met my wife Anikó, once when I went there to visit my sister. We got married on 23 October 1973 in the Mátyás Church, and we have two small children: Anikó who's eight, and the six year old Sanyi. My wife inherited a house at Izsák and that's how the family ended up there. The other reason was that I fell out with my section head. It was quite a complicated business — which arose from the fact that I then had two half-jobs. One involved going out as a machine tool specialist to the company's branches in the countryside to carry out repairs on their equipment, and the other was working inside on a bench repairing the factory's own instruments. Once I came back from two days away on a job to find myself faced with my things having been swept away from my workbench, and someone else working at my bench. I went to the section head and asked him: "Where were you taught to treat a worker like this? If in future you give me the right working conditions, then I'll be the one to carry out the work that's entrusted to me!" A month later he wrote a letter to the boss, saying he didn't need me to work for him any longer. After that I felt that I should put a greater distance between us. And also I got the feeling, in 1979, as if something was changing in the world — and I thought it might be better for me to draw back and make way for others, because they had painted such a black picture of me, set me up in such a negative light, I feared I would only compromise things, if something should start to happen. So I withdrew back to Izsák. My assured monthly wage is 650 forints<sup>55</sup>; I do some hoeing in the garden, I also have a little polythene

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greenhouse, and I grow mushrooms in the cellar. There's another interesting thing — how I came to be a peasant once again. There was a woman secretary in the Cooperative whom I didn't particularly like, and one day I accidentally travelled in to work together with her on the tram. We were already sitting facing each other, and so it was too late to avoid each other. She takes out a newspaper, takes it apart and gives half of it to me, for me to read. That's where I find the advert, for a course in mushroom growing at the Agricultural University. I enroll, I complete the course, and this is how I become a peasant once again, working on the land. I can support myself. I don't have to go begging to anybody for a bonus.

**How do you see the situation and prospects of workers today?**

A difficult question. We should have to talk about it for at least as long we've been talking so far, for me to express my views accurately. Still, to put it briefly: in my view the situation of the working man today is more disheartening than it was in 1945-6, because the unity that was produced by the war and many other common problems didn't go on to develop in a way that would have served the interests of the Hungarian workers. I see it as the greatest scandal that after 1948 the regime didn't help to assist in the forming and deepening of the workers' consciousness. Instead — in establishing its system of informers — it undermined the very workers' unity that should in fact have been the starting point for the development of a true workers' power. In 1956 these workers who'd been cheated before, now judged their situation correctly — they stood firmly and resolutely on the side of the revolution, and they defended it for as long as they had energy left to do so. They did so because they recognised the historical moment. They saw it was possible to establish a free society without exploitation in Hungary. For my part I hold the actions of the Hungarian workers in 1956 to be the most important political and historical events in the history of the Hungarian workers' movement; because they acted for themselves, without being manipulated by anybody.

It has always been difficult to be a working man, but to do one's work honourably is even more difficult. If anything disturbs the composure of the working man — whether it be for political, economic, social or family reasons — it becomes evident in his work at once. That's why we need at last a form of social organisation that will care for and protect all its members, all those who construct, produce and create. Because let's accept it, the manual worker today doesn't have any honour — and yet without that no society is capable of existing. Above and beyond that, we should especially honour those who care to think as well, and if it sometimes happens that the occasional person gets ideas into their head that are not to the liking of the powers that be, that's no reason to chop off their head.

**What do you think of the Polish workers' movement?**

Look, I can't give you an answer to that. More to the point, I don't want to, because it's again a very complicated question, and I don't have enough room to fully express my opinion. And it's far from sure that I judge everything correctly. Things look different, if you think them over while you're hoeing in the garden, and different again if you're in possession of all the information, and you look at them from the viewpoint of the political leadership. But I think you can guess where my heart draws me.

**Have you ever been abroad?**

No. I've asked for a passport three times since 1963, but it's been refused: "Still under the force of punishment" — that's what they've written on the paper.<sup>54</sup>

**Haven't you asked for a pardon?**

No. Look, I didn't ask them to give me a life sentence, and I'm not going to ask them to give me a pardon.

**Where would you most like to go, if you could?**

To India, to Japan, to the islands. Because there somehow humanity has kept in better accord with nature than in the case of

the European peoples. Ordinary people are more human there as well. The West has no attraction for me, because I'm not reconciled with the West. In 1956, and at Trianon too, they left us to our fate, from short-sightedness. We were punished with Trianon for the Council Republic — after that we took sides wherever we hoped to find better treatment for our injuries.<sup>55</sup> It was almost as though we were forced into it. And in 1956, when they bombed the Suez Canal, it was as if they were giving a free hand to the Soviet Union to overrun us — which was again just short-sightedness on the West's part.<sup>56</sup>

**I think I've got you to confess quite a lot. Is there anything finally that you would like to say yourself?**

I am very pleased that at last after twenty years someone comes and asks me about those events that played such a large part in determining the nation's future life. Because whether we talk about the 1956 revolution or not, it's there in our everyday life. Those political, economic and social problems are just as much alive today as they were in 1956, and so long as they are not resolved, they can only grow and spread further. Those dramatic dates which the world already knows — 1956, 1968, 1980 — they are all evidence that the Hungarian people had right on their side in 1956. They are also evidence of how wrongly the politicians in power in those times judged even the decisive events of their age. And it's an immeasurably great crime that even today, in 1983, I still can't talk in public, freely, sincerely and without fear about 1956 and about those things in which I played a part and in which I was a leader. I know one can't spend one's whole life being a revolutionary, but I also know that life is only worth living if we remain true to the sacred ideas of the Hungarian revolution of 1956.

**I would like to thank you for the conversation, and in the name of Beszélő too, to wish you many more happy birthdays.**

*(The interview was conducted by Sándor Szilárdy and first appeared in the Hungarian samizdat journal Beszélő, no. 7, Budapest, 1983, on the occasion of Sándor Rác's fiftieth birthday.)*

*Translation © Bill Lomax 1984*



1. The Hungarian second army suffered catastrophic losses on the Russian front in the winter of 1942-43 in the Valley of the River Don.
2. Irák, where Rácz and his family still live today, is a village with a population of almost 8,000 in the neighbourhood of Kecskemet, about 110 kilometres south of Budapest. Hódmezővásárhely, where he was born, is a larger town in the south-east of Hungary close to Szeged and the Yugoslav border.
3. The Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, also known as the Day of Our Lady in Harvest.
4. The Beloiannisz factory, formerly the American-owned Budapest Standard Electric Company, producing electrical equipment is in the Kelenfold or eleventh district of Budapest.
5. The two workers' parties, the Hungarian Communist Party and the Social Democratic Party, were united into a single party under the name Hungarian Workers' Party at a joint congress in June 1948, after the Social Democratic right headed by Anna Kéthly and opposed to fusion had already been expelled from the party. In effect the union meant the swallowing-up of the Social Democratic Party by the Communists, and in 1950 the former left-wing social democrats who had supported union were also expelled from the new party, and their leaders Árpád Szakasits and György Marótvány arrested.
6. In February 1950 several managers of the American owned Standard Electric Company, later called the Beloiannisz, were brought to trial charged with economic sabotage and espionage against the Hungarian People's Republic. Amongst those put on trial were a U.S. citizen Robert Vogeler and a British citizen Edgar Sanders who were charged with having directed the sabotage and espionage activities on behalf of the American and British secret services. Vogeler and Sanders were sentenced to 15 and 13 years imprisonment respectively.
7. 1950 was a year of mounting industrial conflict with workers' resistance to attempts to forcibly raise production forcing wage rises and falls in productivity. The regime responded by arresting hundreds of former social democrat trade unionists and imprisoning thousands of workers on charges of swindling, sabotage and anti-Soviet activities.
8. Rácz refers here again to the two workers' parties, the Social Democrats and the Communists.
9. Under the piece-rate system introduced by the Communists, stakhanovites were outstanding workers who overfilled production norms and were rewarded by impressive bonuses. Their achievements were then used to raise the output norms for other workers. The practice was first developed in the Soviet Union in the 1930s.
10. Imre Nagy, who as Minister of Agriculture in 1945 had brought in the postwar land reform, was appointed Hungarian prime minister in June 1953 in place of the former stalinist dictator Mátyás Rákosi, and authorised to introduce a programme of reforms known as the "New Course".
11. Nagy's reform programme included restricting the role of the state security organs, the Hungarian secret police who were commonly known by their initials as the AVO.
12. Rákosi, however, remained as party secretary and after the fall of the Soviet leader Malenkov, Imre Nagy was dismissed as Hungarian prime minister in March 1955; Rákosi returned to supreme power, and the policies of the New Course were brought to a halt.
13. At the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February 1956, Khrushchev made his famous "secret speech" denouncing the errors and crimes of the Stalin era, and launched a programme of detotalitarianism calling for economic and political reforms throughout the Soviet bloc.
14. The Hungarian revolution started on 23 October 1956 when Hungarian students marched through the streets of Budapest declaring their support for the recent changes in Poland where the national communist Gomulka had come to power, and calling for similar changes in Hungary, for a new Government and Party leadership and the return to power of Imre Nagy. The Hungarian Communist Party leaders reacted in a way that only poured oil on the flames. The Minister of Interior, László Piros, went on the radio to issue a ban on the demonstration, but later the ban was called off. In the evening, however, Communist Party leader Ernő Gerő made a broadcast in which he denounced the demonstrators as reactionary elements seeking to overthrow the socialist order. The speeches served to further inflame the mood of revolt.
15. One of the students' demands had been for the removal of the Stalin statue on the edge of the city park which they saw as "the symbol of tyranny and oppression", and this was one of the first demands to be realised by a crowd of Hungarian workers on the evening of 23 October who, after many initial efforts, finally managed to bring the statue down. Another crowd was assembling at much the same time outside the Budapest radio building, demanding that the students' 16 points be broadcast over the radio. Here it was that the first shots of the revolution were fired, as secret police troops guarding the radio tried to clear the crowd from the street.
16. The *EAFKE* is a well-known cafe on the corner of one of the main intersections in the city centre of Budapest where the Rákóczi street crosses the Lenin boulevard.
17. *The Truth* (*Igazság*) was one of the more radical and popular papers published during the revolution, edited by two young journalists Gyula Obersovszky and József Gáli with the help of other young writers and university students. Eleven issues of *The Truth* were published between 25 October and 7 November. After the revolution Obersovszky and Gáli were arrested, tried and sentenced to death, later commuted to life imprisonment.
18. The New York Cafe is one of the more well-known meeting places of Hungarian writers and intellectuals, close to the editorial offices of several Hungarian newspapers in the centre of Budapest. Renamed the 'Hungária' after the second world war, it continued for many years to be popularly known as the 'New York'.
19. After a few days in which the revolution appeared to be victorious and the Soviet Union seemed prepared to accept a more independent Hungarian regime, Soviet forces launched a major attack on Budapest at dawn on 4 November 1956 with tank and infantry forces designed to crush the revolution and overthrow the Government of Imre Nagy.
20. On 3 November 1956 negotiations were opened between representatives of the Hungarian and Soviet Governments over the planned withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary. The Hungarian delegation was headed by General Pál Maléter, a hero of the revolution who had just been appointed Minister of Defence. The talks were commenced in the morning in the Hungarian Parliament and continued in the evening at the Soviet military headquarters at Tököl to the south of Budapest. Contacts between the Hungarian delegation and the Nagy Government, however, were broken off, and in fact shortly before midnight the Hungarian delegation including General Maléter were arrested by Soviet security forces under the command of the head of the Soviet KGB General Ivan Serov.
21. At 5.20 a.m. on 4 November 1956 the Hungarian prime minister, Imre Nagy, went on the radio to declare: "Today at daybreak Soviet troops attacked our capital with the obvious intent of overthrowing the legal, democratic Hungarian Government. Our troops are in combat. The Government is at its post. I notify the people of our country and the entire world of this fact." The announcement was preceded by the words "Attention! Attention!"
22. János Kádár, a leading member of the pre-war underground Communist Party, had been imprisoned under the Rákosi regime in 1951 and released under Imre Nagy's Government in 1954. On 25 November 1956 Kádár was appointed first secretary of the Hungarian Workers' Party in place of the former stalinist Ernő Gerő, and at the end of October he formally dissolved the HWP and announced the formation of a new communist party called the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party. Appointed a Minister of State in Imre Nagy's Government on 31 October 1956, he described the revolution in a radio broadcast on 4 November as a "glorious uprising" which had "shaken off the Rákosi regime" and "achieved freedom for the people and independence for the country", and he had called on the Hungarian people and on all democratic forces to help in consolidating the Government of Imre Nagy. On 4 November 1956, however, Kádár headed the new "Hungarian Revolutionary Worker-Peasant Government" which called on the help of the Soviet forces to crush the revolution and overthrow the Government of Imre Nagy. For most Hungarians at the time Kádár appeared as a traitor who had sold out his country and his people to the Russians.
23. The Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, formed on 1 November 1956 by János Kádár, and in the name of which Kádár continued to rule after the Soviet intervention of 4 November. Apart from Kádár himself, however, all other members of the preparatory committee formed on 1 November to reorganise the new party — Imre Nagy, Zoltán Szántó, Georg Lukács, Sándor Kopács, Géza Losonczy and Ferenc Donáth — were arrested, tried, imprisoned or executed under his new regime.
24. The Central Workers' Council of Greater Budapest was formed at the electrical equipment factory *Egyesült Izzó* (United Electric) in the northern Budapest working class suburb of Újpest on 14 November 1956. The resolution of the 11th district workers' council, formulating its workers' political demands, is published in French in J.J. Marie and F. Nagy (ed.), *Pologne-Hongrie 1956*, Paris, EDI, 1966, pp. 223-4. The volume contains the fullest collection of documents on the Hungarian workers' councils yet published in any language.
25. Immediately following the founding meeting of the Central Workers' Council a delegation which included Sándor Bali went to present the demands to Kádár in the Hungarian Parliament. Kádár's superficial conciliatory speech was published in the next day's issue of the Hungarian Communist Party paper *Népszabadság*, and an English translation is included in Melvin J. Lasky (ed.), *The Hungarian Revolution*, London, Secker, 1957, pp. 262-3.
26. After its formation the Central Workers' Council first set up its headquarters in the offices of the Budapest Tram Company in the Akác street in the centre of Budapest.
27. Tibor Déry, a longstanding Communist writer, criticised by the Rákosi regime in the late 1940s, who became one of the leaders of the white rebellion in the years leading up to 1956. After the revolution he was arrested, brought to trial and sentenced to nine years imprisonment.
28. István Babay, who acted from the start as the secretary of the Central Workers' Council, was a delegate of the Budapest Tram Company.
29. János Fazekas, a delegate from Újpest, was originally a member of the

# HUNGARY

- Central Workers' Council executive, but was later voted off the committee.
25. See: Bill Lomax, *Hungary 1956*, London, Allison & Busby, 1976, p.154. Rácz could have read this book in a Hungarian samizdat version issued in Budapest in 1981.
  26. József Sándor, a representative of the Kádár Government appointed to liaise with the Central Workers' Council, had been elected a candidate member of the Central Committee of the HWP in 1951. In 1957 he became a member of the Central Committee of the new HSWP, and head of the department of the Secretariat responsible for party and mass organisations.
  27. Members of the new Party and Government leadership under Kádár. Béla Biszku, one of the hard men of the new regime, became a Politburo member and Minister of the Interior in 1957. György Marosán, a former Social Democrat, was also a Politburo member in the new party; and a Minister of State in Kádár's Government formed on 4 November 1956. Miklós Ribianszky was deputy minister of state farms in the Kádár Government.
  28. József Dévényi, delegate of the Csepel Iron and Steel Works, was initially a member of the executive of the Central Workers' Council and the leader of its first delegation to negotiate with Kádár on the night of 14 November. He also became president of the Central Council, but resigned after a vote of no confidence in him was passed on 16 November.
  29. György Kalocsai, a chemical engineer and delegate from Csepel, was elected vice-president of the Central Workers' Council. Kalocsai and Babay appear to have been more prepared than Rácz to accept that Kádár was negotiating in good faith, and more hopeful for the possibilities of reaching a settlement with the regime.
  30. "Nyilas" was the name given to members of the Hungarian fascist party, the Arrow Cross, that ruled Hungary for several months at the end of 1944.
  31. Csepel is a major industrial and working class centre of Budapest, historically known as 'Red Csepel', on Csepel island to the south of the city. After 4 November there was an ongoing conflict between the Central Workers' Council of Greater Budapest and the Central Workers' Council of Csepel which was from the start more favourable to a return to work, and later opposed the Central Council's call for a strike on 22-23 November.
  32. Antal Apró, one of the few members of the Hungarian Revolutionary Worker-Peasant Government to have actually been present at its formation on 3 November 1956. Member of the Politburo of the new HSWP and Minister of Industry in Kádár's Government.
  33. General Ivan Serov, head of the Soviet secret police, the KGB, was responsible for overall supervision of the repression in Hungary after 1956.
  34. *MÉMOSZ*, initials of the Hungarian Building Workers' Trade Union.
  35. When the Soviet forces attacked Budapest on 4 November 1956, Imre Nagy and several of his colleagues, together with their families, took refuge in the Yugoslav Embassy in Budapest which had offered asylum to them. On 22 November they left the Embassy of their own free will after Kádár had issued a written guarantee of safe conduct for them in a letter to the Yugoslav authorities. Upon leaving the Embassy, however, they were seized by Soviet forces, taken to the Soviet military headquarters at Mátyásföld, and flown out of the country the following day against their will to Romania.
  36. The Hungarian Government's decree law on the workers' councils was published in the party paper *Népszabadság* on 22 November 1956. Jenő Fock was one of Kádár's early supporters. Secretary of the Hungarian TUC (SZOT) in 1955-57, and member of the HSWP Politburo and Secretariat in 1957. He later served as prime minister in the first economic reform period, 1967-75.
  37. The conference was held in the Hungarian Parliament on 25 November 1956. See: Bill Lomax, *Hungary 1956*, pp.161-2.
  38. Marosán had been a baker's delivery boy in the early 1920's, and later a leader of the Food Workers' Trade Union. In his demagogic manner, he liked to recall his working class origins, but would overlook the fact that he had also worked for several years as a ballet instructor.
  39. Miklós Sebastyén, a young engineer and delegate from the Hungarian Optical Works, was a member of the executive of the Central Workers' Council and head of its sub-committee for press and publicity. Ferenc Tóke, a toolmaker and delegate from the telephone factory in the 14th district, headed the Central Council's organisation sub-committee. Both later left Hungary for the West and published accounts of their activities and experiences, which can be found in Marie and Nagy, *Pologne-Hongrie 1956*, pp.242-273 (Tóke) and pp.297-307 (Sebastyén).
  40. Gyula Obersovszky, who had edited the journal *The Truth* during the revolution, continued to publish a clandestine broadsheet *We are alive* (Élünk) in November and December 1956. Working closely with the Central Workers' Council, he was to have edited their planned journal, the *Workers' News*. On 5 December he was arrested, and in 1957 received a death sentence, later commuted to life imprisonment.
  41. Three issues of the *Information Bulletin* did in fact appear, on 27 November, 29 November and 5 December. Extracts from the last issue can be read in Marie and Nagy, *Pologne-Hongrie 1956*, pp.307-313.
  42. The book referred to is János Molnár, *A Nagybudapesti Központi Munkástanács* (The Central Workers' Council of Greater Budapest), Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1969; ref. pp.119-121. A number of proposals for reorganisation of the country's economic and political structure were drawn up at this time, and it is probable that there was more than one of them presented to and discussed by the Central Workers' Council.
  43. SZOT, the initials of the Hungarian TUC, the National Council of Hungarian Trade Unions. Sándor Gáspár was General Secretary of the SZOT from 1954, and a member of the Central Committee of the HSWP in 1957.
  44. Early on the afternoon of 6 December 1956, one day after the special three-day session of the Central Committee of the HSWP — the first since the revolution — small groups of HSWP members held public demonstrations in support of the Kádár Government, marching into the streets carrying red flags, and protected by Hungarian police and Soviet soldiers. Clashes took place in several parts of the city between the demonstrators and members of the public, and the police intervened, opening fire on the crowds. The official Hungarian press reported several deaths and 50 arrests, and blamed the incidents on armed counter-revolutionaries. The clandestine revolutionary press blamed the police for the deaths, and condemned the provocative nature of the demonstrations.
  45. The *Memorandum* was presented to the Government in a final attempt to reach some agreement, restating the Central Workers' Council's fundamental demands and calling for a public reply to them — which never came. For the text, see Marie and Nagy, *Pologne-Hongrie 1956*, pp.314-7.
  46. Salgótarján is a small town in northern Hungary, at the centre of the coal mining area of County Nógrád, where the local people held out for several weeks under the leadership of their workers' council against the Kádár regime's attempts to impose its authority on the county. When several thousand workers demonstrated in the town centre on 8 December in protest against the arrest the previous day of two leading members of the County Workers' Council, Soviet tanks and Hungarian security forces opened fire on them — over 80 were killed and at least 200 wounded.
  47. "Lotto" — the Hungarian national lottery.
  48. The Petöfi Circle was a debating circle set up under the auspices of the Communist youth organisation early in 1956 to debate the problems of applying the decisions of the Soviet Communist Party's Twentieth Congress to Hungary. It soon became a forum in which most aspects of the Rákosi regime's policies were subjected to open, public criticism.
  49. The trial of the leaders of the Central Workers' Council was held in March 1958. The other three defendants, besides Rácz and Bali, were József Nemeskéri, who had come onto the Central Council as a representative of the freedom fighters and who served on its rescue committee for trying to prevent deportations; László Abód, a delegate from the third district who worked together with Miklós Sebastyén in the Central Council's press section; and Endre Mester, who represented the workers' councils of the railway workers and served as a member of the Central Council's political committee.
  50. In the 1960 amnesty it was indeed well-known figures, and former Communists in particular, who were released, like the writers Tihor Déry and Gyula Hay; Imre Nagy's political colleagues Sándor Haraszti, Ferenc Donáth and Ferenc Jánosi, and the army general Gyula Váradi. Also released at this time were the former secret police heads, Mihály and Vladimir Farkas and Gábor Péter. The majority of ordinary working class prisoners, however, remained behind bars.
  51. István Bibó, widely regarded as Hungary's most important twentieth century political theorist and essayist, Minister of State in Imre Nagy's final coalition Government of 3 November 1956, was arrested only on 23 May 1957 but sentenced to life imprisonment in 1958. Árpád Goncz, writer and translator, had worked closely with Bibó as a member of the National Peasant, later Petöfi party.
  52. Ferenc Mérei, a Communist and well-known psychologist, had been an adviser to the Students' Revolutionary Committee during the revolution. Jenő Szell had been responsible for the Nagy Government's relations with the radio. Both had been arrested in 1958 for having collaborated in the clandestine production of the *Hungaricus* pamphlet in December 1956-January 1957. (See: Bill Lomax, *Hungary 1956*, pp.182-192.) Colonel István Marián had helped to organise the students' demonstration on 23 October and the students' militia during the revolution.
  53. György Litván was a young history teacher who had been arrested in 1958 for his involvement with the *Hungaricus* pamphlet. In March 1956 he had been the first person to tell Rákosi publicly and to his face that the time had come for him to resign.
  54. In the so-called "general amnesty" of 1963 the majority of political prisoners from 1956 were released, but significant categories of prisoners were excluded from its terms, amongst them all those charged with murder, treason or espionage, and all those with any previous convictions. Several hundred political prisoners thus remained in prison after the amnesty, and many of them were released only in the late 1960s or early 1970s.
  55. About £10 at current rates of exchange.
  56. Although Rácz was released on amnesty in 1963 he was not pardoned, and thus the punishment of withdrawal of civil rights (which would include the right to a passport) which accompanied his life sentence, would appear to still be in force.
  57. After the end of the first world war the Hungarian Communist Party seized power and established a Republic of Councils under the leader-

## Hungary's unions hailed for freedom fight

Sandor Racz, who spent seven years in prison for leading a 1956 workers' protest against the totalitarian regime in Hungary, arrived in the United States for a two-month visit as a guest of the AFL-CIO.

Federation President Lane Kirkland welcomed the leader of the Budapest Workers' Council, hailing him as an "unbowed and unbroken" advocate of the principles of free trade unionism and workers' rights.

Racz was sentenced to life imprisonment for leading a massive strike that paralyzed Hungary after the 1956 Soviet invasion of that country. Released in 1963, he was forbidden to travel outside Hungary until this year, when he received a visa after a prolonged campaign waged on his behalf by the AFL-CIO, human rights organizations and U.S. Ambassador Mark Palmer.

Kirkland praised Racz and his fellow unionists for rejecting "the coercion of Communist tyranny" and for recognizing

"the gap between rhetoric and practice, between the workers' paradise and the forced labor camp."

It is Racz and not Sandor Gaspar, leader of the Communist-controlled SZOT labor federation, "who is fit to lead Hungary's working people," Kirkland stressed.

### Unions only by name

The Hungarian union official—who many have likened to Solidarnosc's Lech Walesa in Poland—branded Hungary's government-controlled worker organizations as "trade unions in name only. They do nothing to defend worker interests."

Racz painted a grim picture of the problems facing Hungary's workers. The economy is worsening and unemployment is on the rise as "a direct consequence of the government's failed economic policies," he said.

Disagreeing with the news media's por-

trayal of Hungary as a more "mild" or "liberal" form of communism, Racz cited harsh government control of the media, repression of dissidents and denial of basic workers' rights.

"A leash is a leash, whether it's held loosely or tightly," he declared, pointing to the "chilling presence" of some 250,000 Soviet troops on Hungarian soil.

Calling for worldwide labor solidarity behind members of free trade unions in his country, Racz emphasized that "Hungarian workers want what American workers want. They want the freedom that American workers have to do and say as they wish."

Racz will meet with American trade unionists under the federation's auspices in Chicago, New York, Boston, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Atlanta to speak about the struggle for workers' rights and human dignity in Hungary.



President Kirkland welcomes Hungarian union leader Sandor Racz.

# Ex-labor boss breaks silence on '56 Hungarian revolt

By **FRED PIERETTI**  
Home News staff writer

**FRANKLIN** — For his role in the short-lived Hungarian revolution in October 1956, former labor leader Sandor Racz says he became a "second-class citizen" in his native country.

Imprisonment, expulsion from his trade union and partial loss of his pension were meted out to Racz for joining thousands of others in attempting to establish a democratic form of government in this small communist bloc nation in Central Europe.

But perhaps the worst punishment of all for Racz was the sentence of silence. The 54-year-old factory worker, who is compared to Polish labor leader Lech Walesa, is forbidden to discuss publicly the events of 1956. Forbidden, that is, until now.

In the first trip of his life outside Hungary, Racz has come to the United States to discuss his experience in the uprising at the invitation of the AFL-CIO and the Hungarian Alumni Association of New Brunswick, as part of the association's "History Makers Testify" lecture series.

Racz's appearance is hailed as historic by Hungarian Americans because he is providing a first-hand account of the most traumatic event in Hungary's postwar history.

In an interview yesterday at the home of Karoly Nagy, a director of

the association and professor of sociology at Middlesex County Community College in Edison, Racz said officialdom in Budapest purposely downplays the importance of the massive political upheaval that took 20 Soviet divisions to quell.

"The official media of the government view the 1956 events not as revolution but talk about it as a counterrevolution," said Racz in Hungarian. "In our experience we know that in 1956 the Hungarian nation was fighting against Communists and Marxists and demanding freedom, democracy and human rights."

A tool-and-die maker by training, Racz was 23 when he was elected president of Greater Budapest Workers' Council, which staged a general strike against the Soviet troops that suppressed the uprising.

As president of the council, Racz was invited to participate in the rounds of strike negotiations with the Moscow-installed government of Janos Kadar, who today still leads the Communist Party in Hungary. However, Racz was instead arrested as he tried to enter parliament and sentenced for conspiring to overthrow the "people's democracy."

Although he was released from prison by amnesty in 1963, Racz lost 15 years' worth of pension credits, was kicked out of the tool-makers union and has been de-

See **RACZ**, Page A12

## RACZ

Continued from Page A1

nied promotion. He earns only the base pay of about 80 cents an hour for a 40-hour week in a communications technology cooperative.

Undaunted and without a trace of self-pity, Racz has continued to risk his personal well-being to fight for his political vision. He is one of 128 people in Central Europe who signed the "Budapest Declaration," a four-page document issued last October to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Hungarian revolution. The document, Racz said, was a bold reaffirmation of the struggle for democracy for the countries in Central Europe.

Nagy said his organization initially tried to have Racz's trip coincide with this 30th anniversary, but Racz was denied a passport five times. He was finally granted a passport in March — brought to him by two policemen in the middle of the night — only after the AFL-CIO and the American ambassador in Hungary, Mark Palmer, applied heavy pressure on the Kadar government.

Racz says he must be extremely careful in his remarks to American audiences because authorities in Budapest are monitoring his speeches.

One message Racz is bringing to the United States might be hard for his American audiences to hear. He said a lasting peace in Europe, both East and West,



The Home News

**SANDOR RACZ**

would be possible only when the United States and the Soviet Union forgo their "special interests" there.

"There is a danger that Europe may become a battleground of these special interests. Europe must find a humanistic solution to its problems," Racz said.

Racz said Hungary is currently facing dire economic and social problems, including a large foreign debt, growing unemployment and one of the highest suicide rates in the world. Although he could not speculate on what will happen after Kadar, who turns 75 this month, is replaced, Racz said any government will have its hands full.

Racz, who arrived last week, will spend two months traveling throughout the United States.

## Hungarian, Honored in U.S., Is Outcast at Home

By HENRY KAMM

Special to The New York Times

BUDAPEST, March 30 — A deposed Hungarian labor leader who will be an honored guest of the American union movement this spring still works in a factory, but he no longer holds a union card.

"I can't get the certificate of good morals that is necessary," the former labor leader, Sandor Racz, said in an interview.

It is part of the price that Mr. Racz continues to pay for defending his vision of the interests of the working class more than 30 years ago. It cost him a sentence of life imprisonment,

continuing loss of many of his civic rights and a host of difficulties that the Government reserves for those who criticize not only its failings but also the Communist system itself.

Yet Mr. Racz, who is 53 years old, is a revered figure among the small fraternity of Government opponents for what he did during the 1956 uprising and for his unrepentant defense of its ideals. What makes him so special among his fellows and caused the A.F.L.-C.I.O. to invite him for a two-month visit is his undiminished standing as a member of the working class.

"He is our Lech Walesa," said a writer who is a member of the informal

### Democratic Opposition

As a 23-year-old factory worker, Mr. Racz was elected president of the Greater Budapest Workers' Council, which staged a general strike against the Soviet troops that put down the uprising.

### Freed by Amnesty

Invited to one of the tense rounds of strike negotiations with the Soviet-installed leadership headed by Janos Kadar, today still the leader of the Communist Party, Mr. Racz was instead arrested as he arrived at the Parliament building and sentenced to prison for heading a conspiracy to

overthrow the "people's democracy." He was freed by amnesty in 1963.

Mr. Racz, speaking without apparent bitterness, detailed some of the prejudices resulting from his 1956 actions that continue to make his life difficult. His trip to the United States will be his first outside Hungary. He has been refused a passport every time he asked, mostly for journeys to other Communist countries.

What Mr. Racz does not know is that it was only after personal intercession by the American Ambassador, Mark Palmer, with high-ranking party officials that the authorities reversed their written refusal this month to permit the American trip.

His inability to obtain a certificate of good morals also prevents Mr. Racz from being promoted, from joining a work cooperative at his plant to do

well-paid overtime work on a "free-market" basis, from obtaining preferential housing loans and from getting most of the other small privileges that sweeten life in a permanent economy of shortage.

### Earns 78 Cents an Hour

He has been deprived of his pension credits not only for his prison time but also for the 10 years that he worked before 1956. A skilled precision toolmaker, Mr. Racz earns only the base pay of 78 cents an hour for a 40-hour week.

During his American stay, he hopes to spend at least two weeks working at his trade, Mr. Racz said, to see how workers "think and live" in the United States. He wants to share his experiences with them.

The lessons he has drawn from his life, beginning as a carpenter's appren-

tice at age 13, are grim.

"In 1945, I was told exploitation of man by man was finished," he said. "That's people's democracy. I could be fooled then, not now. In people's democracy I found exploitation. There is only democracy or nondemocracy. Democracy stands no qualification. It is diminished by any word you add to it."

Mr. Racz described Hungarian industrial workers as toiling without enthusiasm within a system whose rewards are scant. "Their attitude is not to concede to those above more of their capacities than is needed to earn their low salaries," he said.

He said that despite his prison record, 9 out of 10 of his co-workers sympathized with him. "The 10th is the kind that follows whichever way the wind blows," he said.

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

June 23, 1987

MEMORANDUM FOR PHIL BRADY  
VICE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE

FROM: MAX GREEN *mgp*  
OFFICE OF PUBLIC LIAISON

SUBJECT: Proposed meeting with Hungarian labor leader

I know that the Vice President's schedule is very tight on June 25 and 26, but I feel obligated to tell you that the AFL-CIO has asked if he could meet with a Hungarian dissident, Sandor Racz, on either day. Information about Mr. Racz is attached.

I would appreciate a quick decision because if the Vice President is unavailable I plan to write a similar memo to Frank Carlucci's office. I can be reached at x6270.

Thank you.



# Free Trade Union Institute

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202/637-5374

LANE KIRKLAND, *President*

• THOMAS R. DONAHUE, *Secretary-Treasurer*

• EUGENIA KEMBLE, *Executive Director*

## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Max Green  
**FROM:** Douglas Brooks *DB*  
**RE:** Background Information About Sandor Racz  
**DATE:** June 11, 1987

Attached for your information is background information about Mr. Racz. The article, "Hungary '56 -- The Workers' Case: An Interview with Sandor Racz," is an English language reprint of an article that appeared in an underground newspaper in Hungary. The additional articles are copies of newspaper articles about Mr. Racz that appeared in various American publications.

As we discussed, Mr. Racz will next visit Washington on June 22 and then again on June 25 and 26. He departs for Europe on June 27.

If you require additional information I can be reached at 637-5374.

Attachments

DB:nv

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