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Translated by Martin Chalmers

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Dalos

Introduction

It was on a Tuesday, that the trade union newspaper Népszava published an astonishingly detailed weather report:

“For some time Hungary has been experiencing unusual weather conditions. It is now the end of October, and yet we’re having summer weather - it’s like August. On Sunday the temperature in Budapest was 20 degrees, while in Szeged it reached 22 degrees. In the 86 years since the Meteorological Institute was founded this is the second driest and the second warmest autumn on record.”

The water level of the Danube at Budapest was seven feet - after the high water in the spring a comforting figure. The Seismographic Service reported virtually no tectonic movements, and given the earthquake of January 1956 that was absolutely reassuring.

The cultural offerings of the day were very extensive. The State Opera was playing Tchaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin* and the Popular Opera *Il Trovatore*. The theatre programmes were also impressive: Audiences could choose between Schiller’s *Intrigue and Love*, Bernard Shaw’s *St. Joan* and Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. The Operetta Theatre was showing the ever-popular *Die Csardasfürstin* (*The Gypsy Princess*), with which the company had recently captured the hearts of Muscovites. The violin virtuoso David Oistrakh had in turn arrived in Budapest from Moscow, to give a concert in the Bartok Hall. The Chinese Circus was making a guest appearance in the City Park. In the Chamber Theatre fans of cabaret could enjoy a one-act play with the promising title *We Correct History*.

Television, which was then still at the test stage was showing a cartoon film, a news broadcast and a recorded comedy. Kossuth radio station presented its usual daily programme:

4.30: News

4.35 - 8.00: Music

8.00: News

8.10: Folk Songs

8.40: Marches and Singing

9.00: Children’s Hour

10.00: News

10.10: Lively Rhythms
 11.00: The Women and Girls' Quarter of an Hour
 11.15: Beautiful Music for Good Work
 11.45: Poems
 12.00: News
 12.10: Folk Songs

At exactly 12.53 pm on the 23rd of October 1956 the broadcast was interrupted and the following announcement was read out: *“In order to ensure public order, the Minister of the Interior is banning all public gatherings and meetings until further notice. Minister of the Interior László Piros.”* The statement was repeated in the middle of the programme “Village Chronicle”. There followed opera arias and the programme “Music for Young People”, and after eight minutes, at 2.15, two new statements were broadcast. A brief one first: *“Minister of the Interior László Piros has lifted the ban on public gatherings and meetings”*; and then a slightly longer one: *“The First Secretary of the Hungarian Workers Party, Comrade Ernő Gerő, will speak on all stations at 8 o'clock this evening.”*

At this point the dry as dust Gerő was 58 years old and had reached the peak of his career less than three months earlier: He had been appointed First Secretary of the Hungarian Workers Party (MDP). In practice this meant he was Number One in the country, not only because Prime Minister András Hegedüs was only 35 and so, given his lack of experience, was no competition, but because the Party was the only real centre of power. To put it quite concretely and straightforwardly: He alone was authorised to speak on the telephone to whoever was “in charge” in the Kremlin. The First Secretary had also led the Party and government delegation, whose special train arrived at Budapest's Keleti Station from Belgrade that morning after an exceptionally lengthy eight day visit. Nearly everyone of importance in the MDP had taken part: In addition to Gerő and the head of the government there were two Central Committee Secretaries, the Foreign Minister and numerous economics experts. In the absence of the leadership a younger Party Secretary, the 34 year-old Lajos Ács, had been temporarily put in charge of the Party state - a very risky decision in difficult times like these. Nevertheless absolute priority had been given to making the membership of the delegation as high-powered as possible, because this visit was a kind of collective journey to Canossa - or rather to Josip Broz Tito, the Yugoslav president.

Since 1948 the propaganda of all eastern bloc states had described the latter as “guard dog of the imperialists” because of his break with Moscow. “Titoism” was

one of the central accusations made against the former Minister of the Interior László Rajk in the major show trial of autumn 1949, which on the basis of confessions extracted by torture resulted in several executions and long prison sentences. At that time Ernő Gerő occupied the second most important position in the Party Central Committee after Mátyás Rákosi and so bore a large share of responsibility for all decisions taken - including the resolution of June 1948 in which Tito's "exceptional path" had been condemned as a betrayal of the Soviet Union. Now, however, at Moscow's bidding the southern neighbour was once again a "brother nation", and reconciliation with Tito was intended to strengthen the position of the rulers in Budapest. The fact that through this visit he was calling everything he had done before into question is said not to have particularly bothered Gerő. The general line, whatever it was at any particular point in time, had always been laid down by the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and as an old Comintern hand Gerő was disciplined enough to obey the tactical volte-faces without complaint. And yet this Tuesday morning cast a shadow on the diplomatic success which had just been achieved. From the hasty, nervous conversation with Comrade Lajos Ács, who was already waiting for the Party Central Committee at Keleti Station, it immediately became clear, that the delegation had returned to a completely different country from the one it had left on 15th October. After the obligatory smiles for the cameras and a couple of meaningless sentences for the microphones about the triumphant Belgrade negotiations the Party executive got down without delay to reviewing the situation. The convoy of black limousines with drawn curtains drove immediately to Party headquarters on Akadémia Street. From this moment the highest committee of the People's Republic transformed itself into a permanently deliberating crisis staff, not sleeping, not resting.

The delegation was still on the special train, when Yuri Andropov, the Soviet ambassador in Budapest, sent an urgent and top secret report to Moscow. The previous evening he had spoken several times with Comrade Lajos Ács, who judged the situation to be "very tense and dangerous". On 19th October the Hungarian Defence Minister, István Bata, had even put the People's Army on the highest state of alert, which was, however, cancelled one day later. In principle disturbances had been a possibility for months now, and as long ago as July the Soviet Army command had drawn up "Operation Wave", in order to be able to rush to the aid of the Hungarian leadership if the need arose. However, very little was known of the nature of the impending catastrophe. The Hungarian apparatchiks, who that year were constantly coming and going at the Soviet Embassy, a magnificent villa on Bajza Street, complained above all about the

ideological danger posed by newspaper articles, pointed to the weakness and disunity of the Party or denounced each other for supposed deviations from the “general line”. They were particularly keen on that.

Andropov listened to all these laments and endeavoured to remain loyal to whichever group was dominant. His coded dispatches contained little more than the conscientious reproduction of conversations, only very rarely suggestions of his own and no emotionally tinged commentaries at all - the addressees in the Kremlin were used to “balanced” reports. The ambassador was not a career diplomat, but a still young Party cadre, for whom the posting to Budapest could mean the beginning of a steep rise to the very top or an equally rapid descent.

Had the Party entrusted him with a similar post in Paris, Rome or Vienna, then in these countries it would have been much easier for him to write reports. As a source of information in Paris he would have had Jacques Duclos available to him, in Rome Palmiro Togliatti and in Vienna Johann Koplénig, but also Social Democratic, Conservative or Liberal politicians as well as editors of newspapers of the most diverse tendencies, likewise many writers and every possible kind of social actor. In the Danube republic on the other hand he could only talk to those people who appeared acceptable according to official Hungarian or Soviet criteria. In Hungary it was virtually impossible for him to receive the former prime minister, Imre Nagy, who had been expelled from the Party, even though since summer 1953, that is, since Andropov had taken up his post, Nagy had been one of the key figures in the unfolding events. But any conversation with the man would have been interpreted as a tremendous enhancement of his position. Furthermore Andropov knew very well, that for weeks there had been growing unrest among the writers and students in Budapest and Szeged and that the *Petőfi Circle*, a discussion club officially approved by the Party, was organising demonstrations for this same Tuesday afternoon to express its solidarity with Poland. The immediate occasion was the plenum of the Polish Communist Party where Wladyslaw Gomulka previously condemned as an opportunist had been voted First Secretary to carry out his reform programme. The ambassador was allowed to absorb any information from the Hungarian Party bosses, but not for a moment think of inviting Tibor Déry, the guiding spirit of the literary resistance, or a representative of the rebellious students for a vodka. Yet it was altogether conceivable, that it was precisely the student meeting, supported by the Writers’ Association, which had triggered that collision, which in Moscow had been discussed for months as “the worst possible case” and which could provide a good reason for carrying out “Operation Wave”. And so Andropov permitted

himself to express the carefully formulated indirect piece of advice: *“The Hungarian comrades are evidently no longer confident that they are still able to find a way out of the difficulties that have arisen. (...) We have the impression, that (...) without our help they are hardly capable of acting courageously and decisively.”*

Party leader Nikita Khrushchev was only able to read his ambassador’s telegram after it had been decoded, at about 4.30 in the afternoon, Moscow time. After an early lunch in the Kremlin in honour of the Belgian Prime Minister Achille van Acker and his foreign minister Paul-Henri Spaak he had to attend to the less pleasant aspects of everyday business. The Poles, for example, had been a headache for days. They had been as impudent as to carry out changes in personnel in the most senior ranks of Party and state without consulting Big Brother beforehand, as was expected of them. At a plenum of the Polish Central Committee virtually the entire leadership had been replaced. Wladyslaw Gomulka, once condemned as a National Communist had been promoted to First Secretary, and Marshal Rokossowski, a Pole with Soviet citizenship had been relieved of his post as Defence Minister - outrageous events every one of them.

The Russian army thereupon conducted military exercises in Poland, and there was a state of real tension between the two signatories of a pact which only recently had been declared an alliance for peace. At the last moment Khrushchev went to Warsaw to avert the worst. As an additional means of exerting pressure he called an ad hoc session of the fraternal parties for Wednesday 24th October in Moscow. Gomulka politely declined the invitation, and when Nikita Sergeyevich called Budapest and requested Comrade Gerö to attend, the latter likewise declined because of the difficult situation in his country. The word “No” sounded very strange coming from the mouth of a Hungarian comrade.

After Stalin’s death two and a half years had followed in which Soviet policies both internally and externally had been turned upside down. The diplomacy of the two power blocks, which in the early years of the Cold War had consisted of nothing more than the exchange of notes, was now supplemented by reciprocal visits. With the armistices in Korea (1953) and Vietnam (1954) two proxy wars were ended, at least temporarily, and the Austrian State Treaty in May 1955, which guaranteed the neutrality of the country, demonstrated the potential for agreement in Europe. The summit meeting of the heads of government of the four great powers, the USSR, USA, Great Britain and France in Geneva in 1955, the reconciliation with Tito, Konrad Adenauer’s Moscow trip in 1955 as well as the

visit of the Soviet leadership to London in 1956 all showed the Communist great power in a new light.

With small yet spectacular steps, such as a reduction in the size of the armed forces or the return of a military base in Finland the Kremlin put its adversaries under constant pressure to respond. At the same time Khrushchev and his prime minister, Bulganin, presented themselves in Asia and the Middle East as natural allies in the struggle against “neo-colonialism”. Through India and Egypt pressure was exerted on the Western world. The exposure of Stalin’s “personality cult” at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February 1956 and the mass rehabilitation of the victims of Stalinism made a considerable contribution to the improved image of the USSR. It evidently had something to offer - Bolshoi Ballet, tourism, investment possibilities for the capitalists and parallel to that utopias for the developing countries.

If, thanks to their independent spirit, the Poles represented a constant security risk, the Hungarians embodied the other extreme: They displayed a quite embarrassing submissiveness towards the Soviet Union. This zealous loyalty to the alliance was not worth much, however. For years the Hungarians had been promising at every opportunity, to at last put things in order in their country, but at the same time they lost one position after another to the intellectual opposition. Their chaotic behaviour brought even veteran cadres like Mikhail Suslov or Anastas Mikoyan to the brink of despair. For months the two Kremlin trouble-shooters had been looking for someone in Hungary, who could with some degree of consistency reconcile Soviet interests with the situation in the country. While the doctrinaire Suslov still argued in favour of Gerö, the pragmatic Armenian, Mikoyan, was backing János Kádár. Ambassador Andropov’s predictions were gloomy: If things went on as they were, he had reported on 12th October 1956, then - in the worst of all cases - Imre Nagy would end up in charge in Budapest. The conference of fraternal parties called for the 24th would now put the Hungarian question on the agenda as well as the Polish one. More was at stake than the stability of these two countries. An unwelcome domino effect could threaten not only the Warsaw Pact but all the Communist parties of the continent. Nikita Khrushchev was very well aware, that in that case, the majority on the Soviet Politburo would have no hesitation in overthrowing him.

That morning, Imre Nagy, who in 1953 had been forced into early retirement, “*the Communist with the pince-nez*” as one contemporary called him, left his modest country house on the north shore of Lake Balaton. This time it was not

only the mild Indian summer and the grape harvest that had tempted him there, it was, rather, that he wanted to escape the extremely tense atmosphere of the capital. At this moment the sixty year-old's name was on everyone's lips. Tempestuous meetings at the country's universities, influential intellectuals, as well as ever more clamorous articles in the press, all demanded his return to the leadership of Party and state. His close friends and advisers urged him to act. If it had been dependent on the auspiciousness of the moment alone, then power should have fallen into his lap like an overripe fruit.

Nagy's disposition, however, hindered him from making over-hasty and ill-considered decisions. So during these turbulent autumn days he waited for the return of the high ranking delegation from Belgrade. He had been promised that discussion of his future would soon be resumed, and his prospects were improving with every day that passed. In the last one and half years matters had continuously developed in his favour, and if his name had been mentioned during the negotiations in Belgrade, then Tito - Nagy was convinced of that - would have put in a good word for him. He was equally certain, that he had made a telling impression on Mikoyan during their conversation a couple of months earlier.

Nevertheless his Party membership, with the admission date of 1918, had only been finally restored a mere six days earlier, and he held no positions in the Party whatsoever. If the Party politburo had been as flexible as the Polish CP leadership, then he would rapidly have become a member of the highest ruling committee of the land. But he had vociferous opponents, who had formerly accepted him but then had been unanimously in favour of his expulsion and would never forgive him for having been right. His only possible ally was the Deputy First Secretary János Kádár, in office since the end of July, who had himself suffered under Rákosi's dictatorship and undoubtedly possessed the qualities of a politician. But Kádár, too, was unreliable, a tactician with his own ambitions, a comrade perhaps, but by no means a friend.

At the same time some of those who were his friends, who had remained loyal when fate had been against him, did not count as comrades in the sense of the "general line", which Nagy for all his criticism still felt bound by. Friends who had stood by him, such as Miklós Gimes, Miklós Vásárhelyi or Ferenc Donáth were basically regarded as enemies of the Party precisely because of their years of solidarity with him. Irrespective of Party discipline some of the expectations of the opposition, which he had been told about in excited telephone calls in recent days, must have seemed quite sinister to him. He himself wanted continuity, a

return to his discontinued reform programme of July 1953. The new catalogue of demands which had been drawn up by oppositional intellectuals, however, meant a radical break with the recent past. The students above all, in their youthful enthusiasm, insisted, in addition to realistic desires, on things that were impossible.

1. *We demand the immediate withdrawal of all Soviet troops in accordance with the Peace Treaty [of Paris 1947, G.D.].*
2. *We demand the election of new leaders of the Party (...) by secret ballot from the bottom upwards.*
3. *A new government under the leadership of Comrade Imre Nagy must be constituted. All criminal leaders of the Stalin-Rákosi era must be relieved of their duties immediately.*
4. *We demand a public inquiry into the criminal activity of (...) Mátyás Rákosi (...), who is to be tried by a popular tribunal.*
5. *We demand, that general and secret ballots are held throughout the country, in which all political parties participate, in order to elect a new National Assembly. We demand, that the workers' right to strike is recognised.*
6. *We demand a review and revision of Hungarian-Soviet (...) relations.*
7. *We demand a complete reorganisation of the Hungarian economy under the management of experts. The entire economic system based on planning must be reviewed in the light of the conditions prevailing in Hungary (...).*
8. *The arrangements regarding our foreign trade and the precise total amount of reparations (...) must be published. (...). We demand the right for Hungary to sell its uranium freely at the world market price, in order to obtain hard currency.*
9. *We demand a complete revision of the norms in force in industry and an immediate radical adjustment of wages to the legitimate needs of workers and intellectuals. We demand, that a minimum wage is set for workers sufficient to live on.*
10. *We demand, that (...) agricultural products are used rationally. We demand that individual peasants [non-members of collective farms, G.D.] receive equality of treatment.*
11. *We demand a review by independent courts of all political trials and trials held for economic reasons as well as the release and rehabilitation of the innocent (...).*
12. *We demand unconditional freedom of opinion and speech as well as freedom of the press and of broadcasting (...).*
13. *We demand, that the Stalin statue, symbol of Stalinist tyranny (...), is removed as swiftly as possible and replaced by a monument to commemorate the martyred*

freedom fighters of 1848/49.

14. We demand the replacement of emblems alien to the Hungarian people by the old Kossuth coat of arms [State coat of arms of the Revolution of 1848 without the Crown of St. Stephen, G.D.]. We demand new uniforms for the Hungarian army, corresponding to our traditions. We demand, that 15th March [anniversary of the Revolution of 1848, G.D.] is declared a national holiday, on which all schools remain closed.

According to the legal code of the state in force at the time long prison sentences could be handed down for publishing such sentences, and one could even end up on the gallows for attempting to realise some of these requests.

I saw these fourteen points in the late afternoon of 23rd October, as I was on the way home from school. It was on 7th November Square, where Stalin Street and the Lenin Ring intersected. Something like a hundred people were crowding round the hectographed sheet of paper in the window of the stamp shop. Only a few could get right up to the window, and so the others asked someone who was able to get a good look at the sheet of paper to read the text out loud. One of the passers-by was prepared to do so. The middle-aged man first of all glanced cautiously at the other side of the street - the building of the Secret Police, the ÁVH, was only three hundred yards away - and began to read out the proclamation. I was thirteen years-old, a thin boy, a moderately eager pupil, hungry for both good food and French novels. I was worried about the next day, more precisely the geography period, when I would probably face a string of questions. I was afraid of getting a bad mark, but even more so of the stern gaze of the geography teacher, Mr Pirovsky, a pedagogue of the old school. I could hardly hope for a cold, the weather was fine and summery, one could go out in shirtsleeves, and the idea of playing truant didn't even occur to me.

Of the fourteen demands I probably found all those convincing, which were related to the national symbols - like all children then, I was an enthusiastic follower of Kossuth and Petöfi. Point 9, which demanded an adjustment of wages to meet everyday needs, was of considerable interest to our family. My mother worked part-time as gatekeeper for a building firm and earned 410 forints a month, my grandmother earned 820 forints as an assistant in a craftsmans' co-operative. The rent for our two room apartment without bathroom was 220 forints. The income of the two single women was barely enough to save us from what they considered a great disgrace for a respectable person: to get into debt or, even worse, to take one's possessions to the pawnbroker. Many of our

acquaintances were regularly in the queue outside the shop on nearby Jokai Street. We lived in constant postwar poverty and didn't even think it unjust, but we certainly liked the idea that we could be better off.

In the late afternoon I sat at home swotting up geography with the help of the textbook for the seventh year - the subject was Scandinavian water supply and distribution - and I even thought this a sensible thing to do when my mother and grandmother came back from work and talked about the disturbances in the city. Outside a muffled noise gradually grew louder, and by eight o'clock the Lenin Ring was full of demonstrators. Even at the sight of the vast crowd I did not have the least doubt, that Wednesday 24th October would be an altogether normal school day. Only in the early morning, when I was woken by the rumble of tanks and heard the shooting, did it become clear to me that today at least there would be no questions to be answered at the blackboard.

There were some things, however, that I could not yet anticipate at this point, for example, that I would hardly see the school gate until the beginning of December and that normal teaching would not take place again until the beginning of January. Even the practice of war, which like some director's surreal idea had descended from the Soviet war films on the screen to the streets of my home town, did not give me the idea that I was witness to an event which, whether I liked it or not, would accompany me for the rest of my life. It was the same for everyone who lived through the national uprising more or less adult and aware. For generations of witnesses the event was preserved like a group portrait with millions of figures, among whom they could always find themselves, if they looked.

During my career as a writer and historian I have entertained the most diverse, indeed radically contradictory views of the Uprising. In the late 50's, still little more than a child, I felt sorrow at the defeat, as a Young Communist in the 60's I condemned the Uprising as counter-revolutionary, and in the 70's I developed an increasing understanding for the events thanks to my reading and my own experiences with the system, without, however, considering a repetition of the bloody revolt to be desirable. I did not arrive at a cooler view of the history until the early 1980's. One thing, however, would have been quite impossible over the decades: to suppress the memory of the Uprising, even if I had wanted to. External events too often reminded me of the October days of 1956.

In March 1968 I was interrogated by an officer of the state security service, who

ten years before, in the same building, had stood guard outside Imre Nagy's cell, as the prime minister was waiting to be executed, and fetched his special diet from a nearby restaurant. A few months later in the courtroom of the Budapest District Court there sat opposite me, the accused, a people's juror who had been involved in Nagy's death sentence in 1958. Fortunately, to use a Russian expression, the times had meanwhile become "vegetarian". Both sentence and penal system were incomparably milder than in the years after the Uprising, only the continuity in personnel blew an icy wind in my face.

Before the end of Communism the autumn of 1956 was for almost all adult Hungarians like a natural event, that automatically divided time into a "before" and "after". No public discussion of it was permitted. So the Uprising was transformed into a private affair of the nation. After 1989 there was a flood of new publications, taboos were swept away and well-kept secrets revealed. For the historical blink of an eye, as Imre Nagy and his comrades were exhumed from their anonymous mass grave and reinterred with full honours, it seemed as if the Revolution of 1956 was the starting point, the legitimating tradition of a new, democratic polity. Today the thirteen days of the Uprising are at best present in the debates of historians or in the annual official remembrance.

One more reason therefore - the fiftieth anniversary provides the occasion - to intercut the black and white pictures of Hungary and of my childhood - the hollow faces, ruined buildings and torn up cobble stones of the streets of Budapest - with the present.