

## **Budapest: Interview**

### **In a Basement Hideaway**

LESLIE B. BAIN

LATE in the evening of Sunday, November 4—a night of terror in Budapest that no one who lived through it will ever forget—I met Béla Kovács, one of the leaders of Hungary's short-lived revolutionary government, in a cellar in the city's center. Constant thunder sounded from the pavement above us as Soviet tanks rumbled through the streets, firing heavy guns and machine-gunning house fronts. All day long, Soviet troops had been re-entering the city after their feigned withdrawal, and they had already arrested Premier Imre Nagy along with most of his Ministers and embarked on large-scale reprisals.

Kovács, as a Minister of State of the Nagy régime, had started off for the Parliament Building early that morning, but he never reached it. Soviet tanks were there ahead of him. Now he squatted on the floor opposite me, a fugitive from Soviet search squads.

The cannonade continued all night as we huddled there in the foul air of the small space under dripping pipes. The sound was louder when we cautiously opened a small window. It told us only too clearly that all hope for the uprising against the Soviets had gone. After two weeks of the heroism of an aroused people, nothing was left but a destroyed dream. For several hours Kovács sat plunged in a depression too deep for talk. Then at last he began to recount what he had been through on that fateful day.

THE DIM LIGHT deepened the heavy lines of his face. A hunched, stocky man, with a thin mustache and half-closed eyes, Béla Kovács was only a shadow of the robust figure he once had been. Now in his early fifties, he had risen to prominence after the war as one of the top leaders of the Hungarian Independent Smallholders Party. Back in 1947, when Mátyás Rákosi began taking

over the government with the support of the Soviet occupation forces, Kovács had achieved fame by being the only outstanding anti-Communist Hungarian leader to defy Rákosi and continue open opposition. His prestige had become so great among the peasantry that at first the Communists had not molested him. But then the Soviets themselves stepped in, arresting him on a trumped-up charge of plotting against the occupation forces and sentencing him to life imprisonment. After eight years in Siberia, Kovács was returned to Hungary and transferred to a Hungarian jail, from which he was released in the spring of 1956, broken in body but not in spirit by his long ordeal. After what was called his "rehabilitation," Kovács was visited by his old enemy Rákosi, who called to pay his respects. Rákosi was met at the door by this message from Kovács: "I do not receive murderers in my home."

#### **The Defiance of Mr. Bibó**

So long as Nagy's government was still under the thumb of the Communist Politburo, Kovács refused to have anything to do with the new régime. Only in the surge of the late October uprising, when Nagy succeeded in freeing himself from his former associates and cast about to form a coalition government, did Kovács consent to lend his name and immense popularity to it. He himself had not been in Budapest when the revolt broke out, but at his home in Pécs, a southern city near the Yugoslav border. In fact, he told me, he was made a member of the new Nagy government before he had even a chance to say "Yes" or "No," but, understanding the situation and what Nagy was trying to do, he had agreed to go along. The name of Kovács among the Ministers of State was to many Hungarians a guarantee of a new era in which the government would carry out the man-

dates of the victorious revolution.

At about six o'clock in the morning of November 4, when Soviet tanks were already pouring into the city, Kovács had received a message from Nagy calling an immediate meeting of the Cabinet. When he reached Parliament Square the Russians had already thrown a tight cordon around it. One of Nagy's new Ministers, Zoltan Tildy, who had been ousted from the Presidency in 1948, came out of the building and told Kovács that he had just negotiated a surrender agreement with the Russians whereby civilians would be permitted to leave the building unmolested in exchange for surrendering the seat of the government. However, Tildy reported, State Minister István Bibó refused to leave and had entrenched himself with a machine gun on the second floor. Tildy begged Kovács to get in touch with Bibó by telephone and order him to leave. Then Tildy himself left.

Kovács called Bibó from a nearby phone and tried to persuade him to leave. He was unable to move the aroused Minister, whose argument was that if the Russians moved against him, this would serve as a clear demonstration before the world that Soviet forces had been employed to crush the independent Hungarian government. Bibó declared that the Russians intended to install Janos Kadar and his clique as a new government, and by not yielding, he wanted to demonstrate that the exchange of governments was accomplished by armed force.

I told Kovács that as late as four in the afternoon, I had been in touch with the beleaguered Bibó by telephone. He was still holding out, but an hour later his private line did not answer. By that time Premier Nagy himself was in custody, and the Ministers who had not been arrested were in hiding. Kovács voiced his admiration of both Bibó and the Premier. "My fondest memory of Nagy," he said to me, "will always be his transformation from an easy-going, jolly, studious professor into a flaming revolutionary."

"WHAT DO you think caused the Russians to change their tactics and come in again?" I asked Kovács.

"Two things. First, we went too

fast and too far, and the Communists panicked. Second, the Russians felt deeply humiliated." He went on to explain that he felt that all the goals of the revolution could have been attained if there had been a way to slow down the process. In a free election, he estimated, all the left-of-center parties would not command more than thirty per cent of the vote. But a free election was what the Communists were afraid to risk.

"Wouldn't such an election have brought in the extreme Right and possibly a new reign of White Terror?" I asked.

Kovács admitted there might have been a possibility of that, but he was convinced it could have been checked in time. He went on to say that in his estimation there was no chance of reconstituting large landholdings in the hands of their former owners or of the workers' permitting the return of the mines and factories to their former owners. "The economic salvation of Hungary lies in a mixed economy, combining capitalism, state ownership, and co-operatives," he said. Politically, there had been the likelihood of a strongly rightist development, but, in the absence of economic power, after a few short months the extremists would have been silenced.

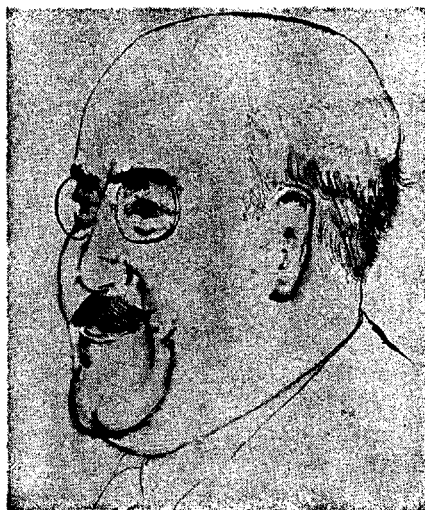
As for the Russians, Kovács thought that their pride had run away with their common sense. "When Pál Maléter [Nagy's Minister of Defense and commander of all armed forces] reported about his first contact with the Russian high command only yesterday, he said the Russians made just three demands—the restoration of destroyed Red Army memorials and desecrated Russian cemeteries, a guarantee that the resting places of Soviet soldiers would in future be respected by the Hungarians, and finally that the Soviet Army when leaving Hungary should be accorded full military honors."

The Nagy government had felt that these demands were reasonable and that their fulfillment was a small price to pay for getting rid of the Russians. Yet when Maléter had gone to meet again with the Soviet commanders later that Saturday eve-

ning, he had never come back—and now their tanks were shooting up the city.

### 'They Will Fail'

I asked Kovács whether he felt the Nagy government's declaration of neutrality had aroused the Soviet leaders to action. No, he thought that the decision to crush the Hungarian revolution was taken earlier and independently of it. Obviously



Nagy

the Russians would not have rejoiced at a neutral Hungary, but so long as economic co-operation between the states in the area was assured, the Russians and their satellites should not have been too unhappy.

In that regard, Kovács assured me, there was never a thought in the Nagy government of interrupting the economic co-operation of the Danubian states. "It would have been suicidal for us to try tactics hostile to the bloc. What we wanted was simply the right to sell our product to the best advantage of our people and buy our necessities where we could do it most advantageously."

"Then in your estimation there was no reason why the Russians should have come in again and destroyed the revolution?"

"None unless they are trying to revert to the old Stalinist days. But if that is what they really are trying—and at the moment it looks like it—they will fail, even more miserably than before. The tragedy of all this is that they are burning all the

bridges which could lead to a peaceful solution."

He went on in the semi-darkness to say that after today there would be no way to bring about a *rapprochement* between Hungary and the Soviet Union. The wound the Russians were inflicting on Hungary was so deep that it would fester for generations. "Yet we can't pick up Hungary and take it somewhere else. We have to go on living with our ancient neighbors who are now in the Soviet grip."

WE DISCUSSED the revolution itself. Kovács's somber eyes lit up. "It has brought modern history to a turning point," he said. "It has exposed totalitarian fallacies more sharply than any event before. Our people were beaten, cowed, and for years lived in abject surrender, yet when the hour struck they all streamed out of their homes, Communists and non-Communists alike, to regain their self-respect by defying their tormentors. And look what happened to the Communist Party! It disappeared overnight—not forced to dissolve, but by common consent! Have you ever heard of a ruling party voting itself out of existence? Once the revolution touched them, all became Hungarians—all except those whose crimes were too many to be forgiven. These are the ones who now serve their Russian masters."

As to Janos Kadar, the Russian favorite just being installed as Premier, Kovács was reserved. He was not sure that Kadar agreed with all that his masters had dictated. Kovács knew, as we all did, that on Friday, November 2, while still serving the Nagy government, Kadar had disappeared from Budapest. All efforts to locate him failed, and it was widely thought that he had been kidnaped by the Russians. Whether this was true was hard to say in the light of subsequent developments, but Kovács thought he might still be acting under compulsion. "Compulsion or no, he has an impossible task."

What seemed to depress Kovács more than anything else was the immediate future of the people of Hungary. He detailed the damage to the country's economy (this was on a day when the damage was only

half as great as it became in the following six days) and said that without large and immediate deliveries of coal and wood everything in the country would break down. Food would be scarce and later unobtainable except in minute quantities through rationing. He estimated that the physical damage in Budapest would take anywhere from ten to fifteen years to repair. "Don't forget," he added, "the wreckage of the Second World War is still with us because of the crazy economic planning of the Communists."

### **'Tell Your People'**

Now and then the sudden staccato of machine guns was heard nearby, amid the artillery. Kovács said that he wanted to leave "so as not to embarrass my host." I begged him to wait until morning when more people would be on the streets and he would not be so conspicuous. He agreed to stay on.

The talk moved toward the crucial point: How much truth was in the Russian assertion that the revolution had become a counter-revolution and that therefore Russian intervention was justified?

"I tell you," said Kovács, "this was a revolution from inside, led by Communists. There is not a shred of evidence that it was otherwise. Communists outraged by their own doings prepared the ground for it and fought for it during the first few days. This enabled us former non-Communist party leaders to come forward and demand a share in Hungary's future. Subsequently this was granted by Nagy, and the Social Democratic, Independent Smallholders, and Hungarian Peasant Parties were reconstituted. True, there was a small fringe of extremists in the streets and there was also evidence of a movement which seemed to have ties with the exiled Nazis and Nyilas of former days. But at no time was their strength such as to cause concern. No one in Hungary cares for those who fled to the West after their own corrupt terror régime was finished—and then got their financing from the West. Had there been an attempt to put them in power, all Hungary would have risen instantly."

I told Kovács that this analysis agreed with my own observation

during the first phase of the revolution. For the first time during the night Kovács smiled. He told me:

"I wish you could convince the West and make them keep the reactionaries out of our hair. Many of the exiles the Americans are backing are men who are marked because of their war crimes. Some of the voices that come to us over Radio Free Europe in particular are not welcome here. I understand the Americans' eagerness to fight Communism, but this is not the way to do it. As long as the West continues to maintain ties with Hungarian feudalists and fascists, we are handicapped in our effort to seek ties with you. Tell your people to help us by selling democracy to the Hungarians, rather than White reaction."

## ***The Four Days That Shook Poland***

**S. L. SHNEIDERMAN**

POLAND's bloodless "October Revolution" against Moscow's domination was completed in the short space of four days, mostly behind closed doors. The results of that conflict are apparent to the whole world, but until recently we have had no more than educated guesses about what actually happened behind those closed doors. The whole story is now available, and I have just read the complete transcript of the dramatic sessions in which Wladyslaw Gomulka's faction faced down the Russians and their Polish followers, thus sparing Poland the agony and terror that still rack Hungary.

THE EIGHTH Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' (Communist) Party, which lasted with only brief interruptions from October 19 to until the dawn of the twenty-second, was opened at ten in the morning on the nineteenth, a Friday, by Edward Ochab, then the party's first secretary. Ochab abruptly declared that it was impossible to proceed

"WHAT OF the future?" I asked. After some hesitation Kovács said: "All is not lost, for it is impossible for the Russians and their puppets to maintain themselves against the determined resistance of the Hungarians. The day will come when a fateful choice will have to be made: Exterminate the entire population by slow starvation and police terror or else accept the irreducible demand—the withdrawal of Soviet forces from our country."

We parted, and I did not see Kovács again. The last thing I heard about him was an A.P. report from Budapest that Kadar had called him in for a three-hour conference. Maybe he was able to find out whether Kadar was acting under compulsion or whether he agreed with all that his masters had dictated.

with the agenda. A Soviet delegation headed by Khrushchev and including Kaganovich, Mikoyan, Molotov, and leading Soviet generals had just arrived in Warsaw, and it was imperative that a delegation be sent to meet them at once.

Before moving adjournment, Ochab asked that Gomulka, who was being proposed as first secretary of the party, be appointed to the Politburo delegation so that Gomulka could take part in the negotiations with the Russians. This daring move had been engineered by Prime Minister Józef Cyrankiewicz, a former Socialist who had resisted Soviet pressure even in the worst days of Stalinist terror. The minutes show that the proposal to appoint Gomulka to the Politburo was adopted at once and that the meeting was adjourned until 6 P.M.

Ochab scarcely needed to elaborate on his statement. The members of the Central Committee were well aware why the Russians had come to Warsaw. The Natolin Group, a die-hard pro-Soviet fac-