



The Hungarian Revolution October 23 - November 4, 1956

Out of the ashes

By David E. Stewart

Fifty years ago, a wave of Cistercians fled Hungary to pursue their vocations. They left behind a ravaged country, their beloved superior, and saddened family.

Editor's note: On September 27, 1956, nine of the Cistercian Fathers of Dallas (Fr. Odo Egres, Fr. George Ferenzcy, Fr. Louis Lékai, Fr. Ralph March, Fr. Benedict Monostori, Fr. Anselm Nagy, Fr. Christopher Rábay, and Fr. Damian Szödényi) began teaching at the newly opened University of Dallas. A month later, events in Hungary would begin to spin out of control and prompt another group of Cistercians to flee their homeland.

SITTING ON THE EDGE OF HIS SEAT, 15-year-old Antal Marton (Fr. Bernard) tapped his foot anxiously. The minutes until the end of the school day passed like hours. As he counted down the minutes, something caught his eye. Outside the second-story window of the Piarist school he attended near the center of Budapest, Hungary, hundreds of young adults were gathering in front of the radio station.

When the clock finally struck 1:40, young Marton sailed down the stairs and out the door with the rest of his school chums. (He might have stopped to savor the moment had he known that he'd never set foot in a Hungarian school again.)

As they spilled out on to Mikszáth Kalmán tér, the students breathed in a startling street scene that conjured up a carnival atmosphere. People walked arm-in-arm carrying flags, singing songs, and enjoying the emerging sunshine on this otherwise foggy day. The sense of fun and freedom in the air must have struck these children of Soviet oppression as odd, even if they had no idea why.

"I was oblivious to what was happening," Fr. Bernard Marton would recall in his diary of the events. "I was not interested in politics."

Walking out of the center of the city toward his home Tuesday, October 23, 1956, young Marton witnessed the inception of an historic political event. This peaceful demonstration would develop quickly into the 20th century's most inspiring example of, as Senator John F. Kennedy would say in 1957, man's "unquenchable thirst for freedom." Spontaneously, impulsively, Hungarians expressed their disdain for Soviet rule. The spirit of this day (and the eleven days that followed) would help shape geopolitics for the next 30 years and foreshadow the eventual, inevitable collapse of the totalitarian Soviet empire.

Somewhere on the streets of Budapest, amidst the thousands of students Marton passed on his way home that day, a third-year law student was marching.

Twenty-year-old Miklós Farkasfalvy (Abbot Denis) had joined the demonstration along with most of his law school classmates. They were showing support for reforms to a Soviet system that in just eleven years had robbed Hungarians of their freedom, their institutions, their economic vitality, and their happiness.

This demonstration had been made possible by a series of events triggered by the death in 1953 of Joseph Stalin. As a new Soviet leadership began to feel its way, Stalin-styled repression gradually relaxed somewhat. Restrictions were eased in 1954, tightened in

1955, and then eased again. All this reflected the power struggles within the Kremlin. In 1956, news spread that the First Secretary of the Soviet Union's Communist Party, Nikita Khrushchev, had publicly denounced Stalin's reign of terror. Hungarians began daring to hope.

"We were marching to put political pressure on the government to reduce the terror," Abbot Denis Farkasfalvy commented recently.

While young Farkasfalvy's passions did not include politics, his daily activities were profoundly impacted by the Soviet's stranglehold over Hungarian life.

After graduating from a Benedictine school in Pannonhalma (one of the few Catholic schools left in existence in Hungary), Farkasfalvy had hoped to pursue his love for French literature. But the state sent him instead to law school.

Unenthusiastically he studied the law four days a week while the rest of the week he studied for the priesthood. But his pursuit of a priestly vocation had to be kept secret since the state had outlawed religious orders (with the exception of a few closely watched religious groups). He had taken his first vows on September 1, 1956, but none of his classmates, and not even his own father, knew this.

While Farkasfalvy pursued the priesthood, other students at the university immersed themselves in the rapidly changing politics of 1956. Over the summer, they formed a discussion group within the Communist Party's youth organization.

This group, called the Petöfi Club (named after the 19th century revolutionary poet Sándor Petöfi), attracted intellectuals and writers who began to explore bold issues like freedom of press and political prisoners. The meetings attracted increasingly large numbers and the discussions became ever more open and audacious. A list of demands started to take shape.

The wheels of change were also turning in some other Eastern bloc countries, especially Poland.

On October 22, in fact, Hungarians had learned from their newspapers that the Communist Party leader in Poland had successfully negotiated with Khrushchev to earn more control over Polish internal affairs.

This news prompted Hungarian student leaders to organize the October 23 march so that they could pay tribute to the Poles and seek concessions of their own. Young Farkasfalvy spent the entire afternoon demonstrating on the streets in support of the cause with his law school chums.

But as the sun went down and the rhetoric heated up, Farkasfalvy left, believing the crowds would soon disperse.

"I had promised my mother I would pick her up and walk her home from my aunt's house," Abbot Denis recalled.

Crowded around their home radio that night, the Farkasfalvy family, along with listeners all over the country, learned that the demonstration was taking a surprising and violent turn. Around 9:30, demonstrators toppled Budapest's 30-foot statue of Stalin and simultaneously, in another part of town, they battled secret police for

control of the radio station.

Blood was now being shed; the revolution was on.

The demonstrators had become, in a matter of hours, Freedom Fighters. (Hungary's Freedom Fighters would be named TIME magazine's "Man of the Year" for 1956.)

At midnight, all government announcements suddenly ceased, replaced by a single piece of classical music, playing over and over.

"CLEAR OUT OR YOU WILL BE SHOT," announced the commanding officer over a loudspeaker at a Hungarian military camp outside Budapest. The officer was addressing a large group of townspeople who had assembled to persuade members of the Hungarian army to join the Freedom Fighters in the unfolding revolution.

The officer's threatening admonition met with disbelief from the townspeople as well as from the soldiers under his command, according to András Kereszty (Fr. Roch), who was serving out the military commitment of his college ROTC program at the camp.

News of the events in Budapest had spread across the country quickly. But within the confines of the military base, officers had attempted to portray the rebellion as the work of hooligans or fascists. Now, the townspeople had made it perfectly clear that citizens were fighting for Hungarian



Photo produced by Jim Rensch from Time-Life documentary

independence and freedom.

As the commanding officer's threat hung in the night air, each soldier silently considered his options.

"I cannot, I will not shoot my countrymen," thought young Kereszty.

As the command was given to shoot, all the soldiers emptied their bullets from their guns onto the dusty ground at their feet.

The crowd cheered and broke through the gate. The Hungarian Army soldiers joined the Freedom Fighters.

"I was just elated," Fr. Roch recalled. "I couldn't believe this was real."

As Kereszty's division arrived in Budapest on October 27, the last Russian tanks were limping out of town.

"We really believed they might be leaving for good," he said. "We spent the next several days searching for members of the secret police who were in hiding."

Within the week, Kereszty's military commitment came to an end and on November 3 (one day before the Soviets would crush the rebellion), he removed his uniform for the last time.

"No one knew what was going on during the last days of October," recalled Abbot Denis. "People had run out of food, so both hunger and curiosity took us out of our homes. There wasn't any reliable information, just rumors."

On October 29, young Farkasfalvy walked to the university

where he was elected to serve on a revolutionary committee and given a weapon. It was his chance to become a Freedom Fighter.

But he refused.

"I realized," Abbot Denis said recently about his thinking at the time, "that an armed rebellion against the Russians had no chance to succeed." This cold pragmatism could be traced to Fr. Lawrence 'Sigmond, his novice master who not only knew that the young monks were not supposed to take up arms, but felt quite responsible for the safety and future of his clerics, who were dispersed throughout the country.

"Fr. Lawrence sent word that we should not participate in the violence," said the abbot. "We knew that an armed rebellion was completely hopeless."

Of course this was not the popular sentiment at the time. Everyone wanted to believe that the revolution would produce a free, independent Hungary. There were some encouraging signs, too.

Thousands of political prisoners had been released, including Cardinal Mindszenty and Abbot Wendelin Endrédy, the abbot of Zirc. But, of course, as law and order broke down, many common criminals were also set free.

On November 1, the government of Imre Nagy (*pronounced Nāj*) declared Hungary a neutral country and asked the United Nations to recognize it. But the UN was preoccupied with a multi-nation dispute over the Suez Canal.

Fr. Lawrence's practical, prudent advice reflected lessons learned from spending six years leading a far-flung religious community under a totalitarian regime that sought its extinction. He had developed a number of approaches to avoid detection by police or informants: disembarking busses and trains a stop or two prior to his destination, dividing his flock of clerics into small independent groups that knew little about each other, crossing out entries in his small appointment book so they were legible only to him, teaching his monks never to say their names in the telephone, and sending messages orally through intermediaries. Between 1950 and 1956, in fact, no novices or clerics were arrested.

Still, he knew that he and his charges were just one miscue away from prison or worse. Just weeks before the revolution, three of them had had a brush with an informant.

On September 1, 1956, Fr. Lawrence was treating Farkasfalvy and his novice mate to breakfast in a modest café in Budapest. They had just completed a three-day retreat for their first vows. While savoring dessert, they were accosted by a man who exclaimed, "Oh, what a nice family gathering: two young men with their teacher!" He snapped a photo and slipped away.

Since Abbot Wendelin's arrest in October 1950, Fr. Lawrence had shouldered a heavy load under the most difficult circumstances. In addition to serving as the novice master of the suppressed Cistercian Order, he also served as Abbot Wendelin's vicar and substitute

during the abbot's imprisonment.

His attention to the safety of his novices would play a key role in helping many escape safely to the West.

And his leadership, along with his spiritual guidance, would influence many of his novices for the rest of their lives.

In Fr. Lawrence, the heart and soul of Zirc remained vibrant and vigilant despite the harshest of odds.

"FOURSCORE AND SEVEN YEARS AGO," declared a defiant voice in clear English, "our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal ..."

Crackling noises briefly drowned out the voice on the Hungarian radio broadcast at a little after 7 pm on Sunday, November 4, 1956.

Soviet forces had begun moving into the Hungarian capital at 4 am on this chilly Sunday. By mid-morning, they had peremptorily subdued Budapest, their tanks careening through its wide boulevards on a mission of destruction and terror. The revolutionary regime of Imre Nagy was quickly defeated.

Radio calls for help to Western powers and the United Nations, which had grown increasingly desperate over the last few precarious days of freedom, were never answered.

"The brave men living and dead who struggled here," the radio voice could again be heard temporarily over the static, "have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract ..." More noise and static. These were the last words heard over Hungarian free radio until 1989.

Using the *Gettysburg Address* to eulogize the Hungarian Revolution emphasized the parallels to America's bloody struggle over democratic principles.

But millions of Hungarians had little time to reflect on the implications of the brief broadcast (e.g., how long would it take Hungarians to break the shackles of servitude?) and hypotheticals (e.g., what if the world's greatest democracy had chosen to intervene?).

Huddled in a neighbor's basement to avoid being strafed by MIG-15s on November 4, Antal Marton and his family began to discuss the idea that their 15-year-old should leave the country. Over the next few weeks, a plan would be hatched.

Cistercian clerics began hearing from Fr. Lawrence.

"How's your Italian?" asked Fr. Lawrence in a phone call to Denis Farkasfalvy.

Similar messages were being transmitted through a variety of means to clerics around the country.

György Kovács (Fr. Matthew), a 27-year-old cleric living in Székesfehérvár 40 miles southwest of Budapest, was working in a



Photo courtesy of Abbot Denis Farkasfalvy

LÓRÁNT Between 1950 and 1956, Novice Master Fr. Lawrence 'Sigmond shouldered the weight of the Abbey of Zirc and oversaw 70 vocations.

home for elderly priests. He received a message in mid-November to come to Budapest to see Fr. Lawrence. Kovács had had the opportunity to attempt his escape in 1950 soon after joining the Abbey of Zirc, but he had chosen to stay. Now, he felt certain his master would recommend he leave. He packed his bags even before seeing Fr. Lawrence.

But Fr. Lawrence did have one surprise for Kovács.

"It is time you take your solemn vows," Fr. Lawrence said.

So in his Budapest apartment, with no pomp or circumstance, Br. Matthew made his solemn vows on November 29, 1956.

"When you get to Rome, they will know that you are a solemnly professed Cistercian," he said.

In Győr (*pronounced dyūr*), which is located halfway between Budapest and Vienna, a young librarian/cleric named Gyula Lelóczky (Fr. Julius) was notified by Fr. Placid Cszimazia of Fr. Lawrence's message. (Fr. Placid would come to Irving in the sixties and teach at the prep school, where he influenced many Cistercian students, including Peter Verhalen.)

Fr. Placid, whose day job was teaching Russian, served as one of Fr. Lawrence's co-workers. He taught the clerics Latin and philosophy; but now, with the revolution coming to an end, he would help the brothers seeking to leave.

Young Lelóczky's decision to flee Hungary would be extremely difficult.

He would have to leave behind his widowed mother (his father had died in 1953), 18-year-old sister, and his 14-year-old brother.

The Lelóczky family had already suffered greatly.

Since the family had owned an elegant pastry shop for decades prior to the Russian occupation, the state classified the family as "exploiters."

His father was forced into a marginal job as a collector of scrap metal and his mother was put to work in a sauerkraut factory. Meanwhile, Gyula was prohibited from attending a four-year university. He did succeed in attending a two-year college and was finally granted the opportunity to operate a one-man library near his hometown.

Now the stark reality of the revolution's aftermath left him tormented.

"I didn't think I could leave my mother alone," Fr. Julius recalled. But she insisted.

"I have seen how you have struggled to follow your vocation," she said. "It is best for you to leave."

DEEP WITHIN A MOUNTAINOUS FOREST in the northwestern corner of Hungary, a set of eyes quietly watched Gyula Lelóczky hike towards the Austrian border on November 11, 1956. Lelóczky had been guided to this route out of Hungary by a fellow librarian from the nearby town of Sopron. The forest would provide cover for an escape. It also provided cover for those stalking escapees.

This part of Hungary juts oddly into Austria. The border lies between three and four miles (as the crow flies) from the western edge of Sopron.

Lelóczky had traveled about a mile when he spotted the set of eyes that were tracking him on this cold, overcast morning. He quickly identified them as belonging to a German Shepherd. As the dog turned toward his camp and ran off to communicate with his masters, Lelóczky had no time to waste.

"I started running for my life," Fr. Julius remembered. "There was no trail so I just ran west for 10 to 15 minutes before I collapsed."

Shortly after regaining his breath and believing that he had evaded the soldiers assigned to this area, Lelóczky joined four high school students who knew the area and also were headed for Austria.

Along the way, they encountered a self-assured man in a Hungarian police uniform who believed he had already crossed into Austria. When informed that Austria lay a couple of miles to the west, he asked if his group – a loud crew of 15 including grandparents, parents, and children carrying heavy bags – which was lagging behind, might follow them towards the border.

It was determined that they could, but Lelóczky and the high school boys were concerned about all the noise they were making. They recommended that the group follow at a distance of 100 yards or more.

"Stop!" called a voice in Hungarian not long thereafter. Lelóczky and the high school boys froze and listened. The large group behind them was arrested.

The Hungarian Army soldiers were carrying out their orders, but only half-heartedly.

"I believe that group would have been brought back to Sopron and set free," Fr. Julius said recently. "They wanted to show that they were doing their jobs. That group probably escaped a few days later."

Almost at the border, the five nearly made a costly mistake. A

Epilogue

Fr. Leonard Barta, 59, a political prisoner who was freed by the Freedom Fighters in October 1956, would come to the United States in 1960

Miklós Farkasfalvy, 20, (Abbot Denis) would be ordained in 1961. He would arrive in the United States in 1962 and begin teaching at the prep school (where he would later serve as headmaster for 10 years) in the fall of 1965. He would be elected abbot in 1988.

András Kereszty, 23, (Fr. Roch) would be ordained in 1960. He would arrive in the United States in 1963 and begin teaching at the prep school in 1968 (after three years of teaching full time at UD).

Pascal Kis-Horváth, 32, (Fr. Pascal) would be ordained in 1957. He would arrive in the United States in 1960 where he would serve as subprior at the abbey and perform pastoral duties at St. Monica's Parish.

György Kovács, 27, (Fr. Matthew) would be ordained in 1957. He would arrive in the United States in 1959 and begin teaching at the prep school in 1963.

Gyula Lelóczky, 24, (Fr. Julius) would be ordained in 1961. He would arrive in the United States in 1964 and begin teaching at the prep school in the fall of 1965.

Antal Marton, 15, (Fr. Bernard) would arrive in New York on December 30, 1957, where he would meet his brother, Fr. Henry Marton. He would join the Cistercian Monastery in Irving in 1962 was ordained in 1967. He would begin teaching at the prep school (where he would later serve as headmaster for 16 years) in the fall of 1968.

Fr. Emilian Novak, 32, would arrive in the United States in 1959 and teach at both UD and the prep school before leaving the Cistercian community to become a pastor in Greenville, Texas.

Others Cistercian refugees of the October 1956 Revolution: Fr. Felix Vongrey never came to the US. Fr. Gilbert Hardy would teach at UD from 1962 to 1994 when he returned to Hungary. Béla Mensáros (Fr. Aurel) would teach at the prep school until 1983 when he left the priesthood. Br. Romuald and Br. Zsombar (shown in the photo on page 10) left the Cistercian community before being ordained.

trip wire had been set between two trees. Such devices were used to trigger a flare that would notify guards of an escape and its location.

At the border, the forest had been cleared in an area about as wide as a large highway. The soil was plowed and raked regularly to show footprints. On this day, many footprints could be seen at this crossing between two guard towers, headed into Austria. Lelóczy and the four high school boys weren't sure whether the guard tower about 100 yards away was occupied. They decided to make a run for it.

Austria contrasted starkly with Hungary. It was almost as if a black-and-white world now appeared in color.

"The peacefulness was shocking," Fr. Julius remembered. "No one was afraid. People dared to speak without checking around for signs of an informant first. It was like two different worlds, just a few miles apart."

Fr. Placid had told Lelóczy to make his way to Heiligenkreuz Abbey, the second oldest extant Cistercian Abbey that sits about 30 miles south of Vienna.

He was the first of eleven Cistercians from Hungary who would find refuge there.

This number does not include the November 21 arrival of Antal Marton, who would become a Cistercian several years later in America. (Fr. Bernard's diary of his escape can be found at www.cistercian.org/school, see December Continuum online.)

Few of the Cistercians escaping Hungary knew each other, except for those who had been part of the same novice class. Fr. Lawrence had hid identities to protect everyone.

Farkasfalvy and fellow cleric Béla Mensáros (who would teach as Fr. Aurel at the prep school in Irving until 1983 before leaving the priesthood) arrived the day after Marton.

They had jumped on a food truck in Budapest, which carried them along with a large number of escapees towards Austria.

Despite being stopped by Soviet guards along the way, the food truck continued to make its way towards the border unimpeded. It became clear that money could smooth one's journey out of the country.

"In effect, a little industry sprang up to carry refugees towards the border," Abbot Denis said. It operated like an underground railroad, Hungarian style. Approximately 200,000 Hungarians fled the country after the October 1956 uprising.

Pascal Kis-Horváth, who had been arrested while trying to escape in 1950, arrived safely at Heiligenkreuz on November 24, followed by Kereszty on November 28 and Kovács on December 16.

At the Austrian abbey, the refugees were provided with all the necessities that they had had to leave without. Within days, they boarded a train to Rome and were immediately thrown into theology classes at the Benedictine University of Sant'Anselmo while they lived at the Cistercian Order's General House.

"It was wise to begin classes immediately," said Abbot Denis recently. "It would take us some time to digest the huge changes that had just occurred. We were happy but confused."

(Fortunately for the Hungarians, language was not a problem in Rome. The classes at the university were taught in Latin so all were able to follow along and take notes without difficulty.)

Back in Hungary, the families of the young Cistercians were glad to receive messages over Radio Free Europe of their sons' safe arrivals in the West.

But their hearts were broken.

Years later, Fr. Julius' mother would relate how after his train left Győr, she collapsed in prayer at their local church which featured a Pieta statue.

"I felt," she recalled of that day looking at Jesus in his mother's arms, "very much like Mary must have felt after losing her son."

email: david@stewartpublications.com

ROMAN REFUGE Some of the Cistercians who escaped Hungary in 1956 are pictured at the General House in 1957 (front row, l-r): Br. Denis Farkasfalvy, Br. Matthew Kovács, Br. Pascal Kis-Horváth, Br. Julius Lelóczy; (back row, l-r): Br. Zsombor Pollner, Br. Roch Kereszty, Br. Aurel Mensáros, and Br. Romuald Verbay.



Photo courtesy of Fr. Julius Lelóczy