

Professor recalls Hungarian Revolution

by Doug Clark
DTH Contributor

Tomorrow marks the 20th anniversary of revolution in Hungary, but Hungarians are not celebrating. On Nov. 4 of the same year, thousands of Russian tanks and troops overwhelmed insurgent Freedom Fighters and dashed the nation's hope of independence.

Paul Debreczeny was one of 200,000 Hungarians to flee to Austria after the short-lived revolution that began spontaneously the night of Oct. 23, 1956. He barely made it.

Debreczeny was 24-years-old then and working in the Slavic literature department of the university in Budapest. Today he is the chairman of the UNC Slavic languages department.

On the 23rd, crowds demonstrated throughout Budapest, angry after 11 years of Soviet domination. One group, mostly students, gathered outside the radio station requesting that its list of 16 political demands be broadcast. Among the demands were: withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary; free elections and the establishment of a multi-party system; freedom of speech and press; and the removal from the city of a statue of former Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, a symbol of Russian oppression.

The crowd was encouraged by the success of similar demonstrations in Poland earlier in the month. Although Nikita Khrushchev threatened the use of force to restore order in Poland, the Soviets had backed down.

Nevertheless, the radio station refused the crowd's request. When the demonstrators did not disperse, members of the AVH, Hungary's secret police, opened fire and killed many. Debreczeny was with demonstrators in another part of the city when news of fighting came. Some people went to get weapons. Most were confused.

"You get that feeling of uncertainty," he said with a slight accent. "You only know somebody is shooting somewhere."

The radio station was stormed and captured. Crowds demanded the return of Imre Nagy, the liberal former premier ousted in 1953, to head the government in place of Stalinist Erno Gero.

The next day Gero was dismissed and Nagy was appointed prime minister. Units of the Hungarian army joined the insurgents, who called themselves "Freedom Fighters."

The Russians responded with force. Looking out the window of his apartment before dawn on the 24th, Debreczeny saw "tanks rolling in, one after another. Huge Russian T-34's."

"We were all in the streets," he said. "I talked to Russian soldiers and told them they were fighting workers and students, not fascists. A lot of these Russians simply put down their weapons and came over to our side."

For Debreczeny the most dramatic moment came during a confrontation between a Hungarian tank and a Russian armored vehicle. The tank was

"The Russians were virtually defeated or dissolved," Debreczeny said. "They didn't have much choice but to withdraw and negotiate."

When the Russians did withdraw from Budapest on Oct. 29, the city rejoiced, Debreczeny said.

"There was such a feeling of victory, a communal feeling. We were so friendly, joking, embracing each other, so happy. I've never felt so much a part of a group of people."

It didn't last. While negotiations were being held and a social-democratic government was forming, the Russians assembled in Hungary an estimated force of 2,500 tanks and 75,000 troops, larger than Rommel's and Montgomery's combined forces at El Alamein.

"After one day we realized there was no hope. We had rifles against tanks."

blocking the Margaret Bridge connecting Buda and Pest across the Danube.

Neither knew quite what to do, Debreczeny said. A crowd gathered. Finally, since he spoke fluent Russian, Debreczeny climbed on the vehicle and convinced the Russians to put down their weapons and abandon their vehicle.

"They had no desire to shoot into a crowd," he said. "They didn't know what was going on or why."

Those Russians who did fight met resistance from Freedom Fighters with captured weapons and young boys with molotov cocktails.

The Freedom Fighters liberated the jails and released thousands of political prisoners. Debreczeny's brother, Peter, who now lives in London, had been serving a five-year term for attempting to escape from Hungary. He showed up at Debreczeny's apartment on the second day of fighting.

At first, the revolution seemed a success.

"Khrushchev was under attack for his liberal policies," Debreczeny said. "He wanted to prove he was a strong leader. They did not negotiate in good faith."

On Nov. 4, the Russians re-entered Budapest. Debreczeny and his brother obtained weapons from Freedom Fighters and joined in the resistance.

"After one day we realized there was no hope," he said. "We had rifles against tanks. Fighting on meant only more bloodshed. We put our weapons down."

Major resistance was over by the ninth, although sporadic fighting continued for several weeks. Russian tanks destroyed rows of apartments and other buildings.

Through this crisis, Hungary received no aid from the West, despite Nagy's request for United Nations intervention. The Suez crisis in the Mideast coincided and attracted world attention away from Hungary.

Debreczeny's brother, still under a prison sentence, fled the country, while Debreczeny remained. Then he realized his name and address was on a list for

having received a rifle. He didn't know who had the list.

"That was one of the things that drove me out of Hungary," he said, "that they would find me."

"I didn't decide to leave until Nov. 23. A couple of friends got arrested that day. I figured (arrest) was getting close."

An estimated 16,000 Hungarians were arrested and deported to Siberia. Nagy was arrested and later shot, as was Paul Maleter, Nagy's minister of defense and a hero of the uprising.

Debreczeny and four friends took a train from Budapest to Gyor, in western Hungary. From there they took a bus to a village near the Austrian border.

"One of my friends knew somebody who had been a border guard," Debreczeny said. "We gave all our money over to him. After sunset he took us quite a bit of the way to the border. Then the Russians started shooting. He left us with rough directions and went back to the village."

"We didn't know where we were," he said, but they could see spotlights on high towers.

"The Russians started shooting in earnest. We lay down on the ground, and that was when we realized we were on the border," from a strip of sandy ground separating the two countries, he said.

Still, they were not safe. Russian soldiers made forays into Austria, Debreczeny said. He said he saw one Russian leading a woman and her baby back into Hungary.

"We didn't know where we were," he said. "There was firing on both sides. We hid in a haystack, then set out again. We might have stumbled back into Hungary but an Austrian picked us up and put all five of us in his Volkswagen."

"We knew we were safe when we saw the first road sign in German. It was such a relief."

Debreczeny has returned twice to Hungary, in 1973 and again this summer. Since a general amnesty was declared during the '60s for all participants in the revolution, he had no trouble obtaining a visa. But his wife is English and his two children American, so he has no desire to return permanently, although his mother still lives in Hungary.

Ironically, Debreczeny noted that most of the objectives of the revolution have been realized, except independence from Moscow.

"Friends were discussing politics at the top of their voices in public places," Debreczeny said of his last visit. "I tried to quiet them."

From the revolution, he said, "The Russians could see that if they were going to occupy these countries they should give some concessions."

But memories in Hungary of the revolution itself are fading, Debreczeny said.

"They didn't like the Russians suppressing it but they're not proud of what happened. It was a bloody affair and better to forget is the attitude."

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