

# HUNGARY'S POET-HERO

By LOUIS FISCHER, *whose new book, "Russia Revisited" (Doubleday, \$4), from which this excerpt is taken, comes out August 1. (Copyright 1957 by Louis Fischer.)*

**T**HE hero of Hungary's October-November 1956 revolution is Sandor Petoeffi, who died in 1849 by a Russian saber. In 1849 Petoeffi was twenty-six years old, yet the Hungarian nation knew him. He was its revolutionary bard. When the uprising came he wrote "There Is a Thought Within Me."

There is a thought within me  
To die in the comfort of my bed,  
To slowly wither as a flower  
On which a secret worm has fed.  
Don't give this death. Oh God  
Don't give this death to me.  
Would that I were a tree that  
lightning strikes,  
Torn by the storm, uprooted from  
the ground;  
Would that I were a rock on the  
crevasse edge  
Hurled by the wind, chasm bound.  
When men tear off their yoke of  
captivity  
And raise their heads to the feast  
of Liberty  
And purple banners in the breeze  
unfurled  
Proclaim these holy words to all  
the world,  
Freedom.  
And where from East to West  
The trumpet sounds  
And the people conquer the  
barricades—  
There let me fall, on *this*  
battlefield  
There let my young blood flow  
from my heart.

He had his wish. True to his verse Sandor Petoeffi volunteered to fight. A Cossack sword cut him down. But great spirits are immortal. For more than a century Hungarian children have recited Petoeffi's uplifting lyrics. He is in their blood. Though a fur-capped mercenary sliced through Sandor Petoeffi's brain, he survived to return the blow. Ask a Hungarian where the 1956 revolution began and he will reply, "In the Petoeffi Club."

The history of postwar Hungary began as well as might be expected, for in 1945, in the presence of a Russian army of occupation, the authorities permitted free national elections which gave the Communists only 17 per cent of the vote as against 57 per

cent to the Small Holders (peasants) party. Soon, however, the mask fell; on February 26, 1947, Bela Kovacs, the general secretary of the Small Holders party, was arrested and disappeared; later his party was suppressed, and the Communists, needless to say, won a big majority in the next elections. All seemed to be going very well for Moscow.

Normality, however, is incompatible with Communism. When Russia's troubles with Tito began in 1948, the earth in neighboring Hungary heaved sympathetically. There followed a made-in-Moscow heresy hunt of national Communists. It needed big game. One of the scapegoats, held high to intimidate the rest, was postwar Hungary's first Minister of Interior in charge of the secret police: Laszlo Rajk, a member of the Communist Politburo. Arrested on May 30, 1949, tried in September of the same year, he confessed, and the instructed court sentenced him to death by hanging.

After four years of this kind of terror, under the "hard," Moscow-trained first party secretary, Matyas Rakosi, things looked up. The sentencing of secret-police chief Gabor Peter in March 1953, and the elevation of Imre Nagy to the Prime Ministry in July 1953, allowed Hungary's people, and her writers, some leniency. Nagy was a university professor and a member of the Academy of Science, and therefore rated the distinction of intellectual. Nagy's dismissal in March 1955, and the substitution of Andras Hegedues, behind whose transparent false-face was desecrated the grim, Mongol-like bald head of Rakosi, might have heralded another "hard" period. But the secret police had lost its frightening authority, and, as a result of recurrent power shuffles the party had already descended into the political and ideological doldrums.

The civil war which now developed between writers and government was the first battle or in fact the microcosm of the Hungarian revolution. The importance of literature in that revolution can scarcely be exaggerated. Quite correctly the *Manchester Guardian* said in December 1956, "The Hungarians have been fighting under the sign of the nineteenth-century poet Petoeffi." It was the authors' re-

volt in 1955 which led to the Spring 1956 Petoeffi Club phase, and that in turn inspired the historic uprising in October of that year. As in Poland, so in Hungary the pen plowed the field and planted the seeds.

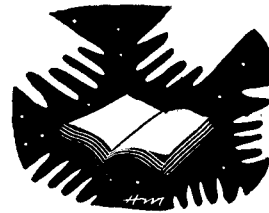
The ferment first manifested itself publicly in an article by Gyula Hay, a very prominent author, in *Irodalmi Ujsag* (Literary Gazette) of September 10, 1955, in which he, a party member since 1919, after pledging allegiance to the regime, deplored the dearth of good drama and the "terrible monotony" of the few new plays produced, and ended with a minor-key yet unmistakable declaration of war.

The very next issue of *Irodalmi Ujsag* published a poem by Laszlo Benjamin, a Communist, called "A Writer-Minister," which was a short, sharp attack on Jozsef Darvas, the Minister of Popular Culture.

These literary stabs at the regime won applause and approval in the art world. Emboldened, the restless Communists in the Writers Union assembled in caucus on November 10, 1955, and drew up a manifesto demanding freedom from the government's "aggressive intervention" in cultural affairs. This manifesto, when circulated among party members in the Writers Union, collected an imposing number of signatures: sixty-three. Although the manifesto was not published (it appeared in print for the first time on October 10, 1956, on the eve of the revolution), the party leadership scented danger and tried to induce the writers to withdraw their signatures. Only four did.

The Central Committee of the Hungarian Communist party then drafted its own resolution on literature, convened the Communists in the Writers Union, and demanded that they subscribe to the new resolution. Most of them refused and ten of the most prominent resigned their offices in the Writers Union. They received a stern party reprimand with a warning that the next offense would mean expulsion from the party. Thus, the party met the writers' revolt with its own declaration of open warfare.

The people's movement *per se* began tamely enough with a conference of government economists on May 30. Two evenings later the Institute of Literary History assembled under Petoeffi Club auspices to admit past mistakes and to promise amends. June 4 saw a turbulent session of the Hungarian Academy of Science. Ferenc Mucsi complained of the sup-



pression of criticism by the Institute of Communist Party History. Lajos Lukacs said it was time for party historians to do more than merely "explain *ad nauseam* the pronouncements of certain party leaders." Arpad Kalmar of the Budapest Lenin Institute declared that the thinking of university students was "on the elementary-school level." The audience applauded.

History was being falsified; "I say these strong words whether they please or not." The history of the Second World War had been distorted; "I believe it an exaggeration to maintain that the entry of the Soviet Union into the Far Eastern war was the main factor in the defeat of Japan."

Gyorgy Litvan protested that every year teachers had to reverse themselves and teach the opposite of what they had taught the year before. "All of these contradictions lead to cynicism among youth just when we are constantly preaching against cynicism." Cynicism is also induced by "constantly emphasizing the leading and exemplary role of the Soviet Union." Perpetual attacks on the West, he concluded, merely sowed sympathy for the West.

Thus far, none of the speakers had been heckled. Now, however, Madame Erzveset Andics, professor of history at the University of Budapest and chairman of the peace movement, took the floor. Her speech broke up the meeting. More had been done in the past few years to clarify historical truth than in many preceding generations, she averred.

The crowd, consisting chiefly of university students, booed. Professors smiled.

"If anyone," she continued, "tries to prove that Marxist history has committed faults . . ."

Cries of "Don't you think so?" interrupted her.

"We admit our mistakes," she stated.

"You don't," the listeners argued.

"But criticism does not mean that we must ridicule our accomplishments. That is not the truth, that is not dialectical."

The audience laughed so long she could not finish her address.

**O**VERWHELMED, apparently, by this hostile demonstration, the "official Communist" officers of the Petoefi Club did not convene another meeting for ten days. To their dismay they now discovered that instead of directing the writers' thaw into a controlled channel they had permitted, or aided, it to overflow into all neighboring fields of culture. In effect, the Petoefi Club had become an open

political forum. Petoefi Clubs with the same objective were springing up throughout Hungary. The Communist party looked askance at this development, but it was rocked by inner dissensions, rumors of Rakosi's dismissal ran up and down the land, and nobody yet seemed prepared to lay a rough hand on the spreading Petoefi Clubs.

The Budapest Petoefi Club's activity reached a peak on June 19, 1956. It met, this time, in a theatre with a capacity of 800, and that number of invitations was issued for 7 P.M. By 4:30 every seat was occupied. At 6:30, when the proceedings got under way, standees crowded the aisles, window-sills, stage, and every other available cubic inch of space. There were at least 1,500 persons in the theatre, an estimated third of them army officers in uniform. It was a hot, humid evening. By common consent, nobody smoked. Eating and drinking were out of the question. Yet the audience, to a man, remained in the hall until 3:30 in the morning.

Peter Kuczka, a young poet, made a frontal attack on Rakosi, first secretary of the party, boss of Hungary. "A good journalist," he began, "is characterized by a car, a chauffeur, and a special shop" where he can buy goods not available to the general public. "He must write the truth. However, in our country, the truth must conform to the changing party line. In 1949 Rakosi said Laszlo Rajk was a traitor. In 1955 he said Rajk was a palace provocateur. This year he calls Rajk comrade. The masses have lost confidence not in the party but in its leaders . . . Truth can exist only where freedom exists. We demand a free press . . ."

Up spoke Madame Laszlo Rajk, widow of the executed man. Greeted with thunderous and prolonged applause, she said she did not wish to be made a heroine because of what happened to her husband. She merely asked that those who murdered him be ejected from office. She too had been in prison for years; Hungarian prisons were a disgrace to a people's democracy. When she finished the

audience accorded her a standing ovation.

Marton Horwath, editor of *Szabad Nep*, received permission to defend the regime. Boos drowned his voice on three occasions. "Don't insult the party," he urged.

"We're the party," a man in the orchestra replied.

"Let's remove Laszlo Rajk's corpse from the ditch and give him a decent burial," another person cried.

"Why do we call this the Sandor Petoefi Club?" a third member of the audience demanded. "Petoefi fought for press freedom."

"Which we haven't got," a neighbor added.

"That's right," Horwath unexpectedly agreed.

"You're telling us," a listener remarked aloud. The audience burst into laughter; Horwath shrugged his shoulders and resumed his seat.

Seven hours after the chairman banged down his gavel and closed the proceedings, Poznan's working class walked out into a general strike. The two events were in no wise connected. But using the June 28-29 Poznan uprising as a pretext, Rakosi shut down all Petoefi Clubs in Hungary on June 30.

**H**OWEVER, Rakosi was called to Moscow shortly thereafter, and on July 18 he resigned all his functions in Hungary and went to live in Outer Mongolia with his Mongolian wife. The Petoefi Clubs were again legalized. The writers' revolt flared to new heights. The public murmured against privations and restrictions. The Communists ruled but confusion reigned. All of the summer of 1956, Hungary rocked rudderless in the tempest. Yet nobody preached, and neither the authorities nor the nation expected, an armed revolution. By common assumption, a dictatorship could not be overthrown by force. But imminent events were to prove that not every one accepted this assumption, and that Hungarians still lived in whom flamed the ardent physical courage, as well as the spirit, of Sandor Petoefi the poet.

