GETLER
MICHAEL

1976

Hungary After 20 Years: 'A Kind of Freedom'

By Michael Getler
Washington Post Foreign Service

BUDAPEST, Hungary—There is still a trace of debris from World War II in the back streets of this proud old capital. But the signs of a fierce and bloody rebellion against Stalinism here 20 years ago have been virtually covered up.

A simple plaque outside the local Communist Party headquarters on Koztarsasag Square lists the names of the party officials who were gunned down by an angry mob as they left the building on Oct. 23, 1956.

On that day, an anti-Soviet revolt began with mass demonstrations of students and workers demanding withdrawal of Soviet troops and introduction of democratic methods of government.

But on the wide boulevard called Jozsef Ring, where Soviet tanks eventually leveled hundreds of those rebellious Hungarians, there are now only crowded shops and the swirl of heavy traffic that Hungarians have come to be proud of as reflective of their relative prosperity within Eastern Europe.

There is also no trace here of some other things.

"The revolutionary spirit is gone completely. There are no dissidents to speak of, and only a few isolated cases of clandestine publication," says one Hungarian intellectual.

"But of course," another adds, "there is no revolutionary situation today. This is a highly emotional country, and we have such a bloody and tragic history that at certain moments, like in 1956, deep frustrations come out.

"What the uprising did achieve eventually is the kind of relative freedom we have today. The hated Rakosi [former Stalinist ruler Matyas Rakosi] disappeared.

See HUNGARY, A15, Col. 1

One participant's vivid recollections of the revolution. Page B1.

Hungary: 'We Have Such a Bloody and Tragic History'

Yet the main lesson from 1956 is that absolutely nothing can change things overnight."

Hungary remains officially devoted to the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact. Within that alliance, this nation of 10 million people has become the most liberal state in the Eastern bloc.

How it got that way is explained largely by the extraordinary political skill of Hungarian Communist Party chief Janos Kadar—who has held office longer than any other Communist Party leader in the Warsaw Pact.

Kadar, now 63, came to power in the midst of the October, 1956, uprising and gradually won the confidence of the population. Since then he has used his prestige and unwavering support of Kremlin foreign policy to win greater leeway at home for the clever and sometimes volatile Hungarian people.

"In hundreds of years of Hungarian history," says an author here, "he is the first political realist. He is not an intellectual, but he is very shrewd, able and extremely popular. We are all anxious to have him as long as we can."

What happens when Kadar leaves the scene is the question that hangs most heavily over Hungary today.

Experienced foreign diplomats feel that Hungary's liberalism is more a measure of Kadar's trusted status in the Kremlin than any general Soviet tolerance of what has come to be called "goulash communism." Yet most do not feel that the Soviets will try to turn the clock back on reforms here after Kadar leaves.

But some Hungarians say they already sense new Soviet pressures to tighten control, to "level off" the economic and cultural well-being within the bloc so that the Soviets do not suffer in comparison.

Budapest reflects the delicate balance with which the forces of East and West are being tested in Eastern Europe today.

A Western visitor, or a Hungarian for that matter, can sit on the terrace of the ultra-modern, American-style Duna Intercontinental Hotel, sip a Scotch whiskey and look across the Danube River to a new Hilton Hotel going up amid the beautiful hills of Buda.

The headquarters of the Hungarian National Bank, not far from the river, houses some of the most respected bankers, economists and currency exchange experts in Europe. Some are

In the 1956 revolt, Hungarian rebels gun down members of the secret police in Budapest;

the authors of an economic reform plan that has pushed Hungary much further toward profit motives and market-demand economics than any other Warsaw Pact country.

Despite a touch of tinsel in its new hotels, Budapest has not succumbed to the East Berlin-style attempts to be more glossy than the West. On the other hand, one sees far more apartment construction throughout East Germany than is apparent here. The lack of adequate housing is a major complaint.

While the central city retains much of its old charm and good restaurants, the streets where most of the two million people live have the rundown appearance and gray coat of coal soot that typifies Eastern Europe.

On Rakoczi street, the government travel agency advertises package tours of Japan and New York, the phenomenon that most distinguishes Hungary from its Communist colleagues.

Each year some 10 million people visit Hungary. Most are from the East. Budapest is a pleasant change from the more dreary capitals elsewhere. But there are hordes of West German businessmen here and Austrians on inexpensive weekend trips.

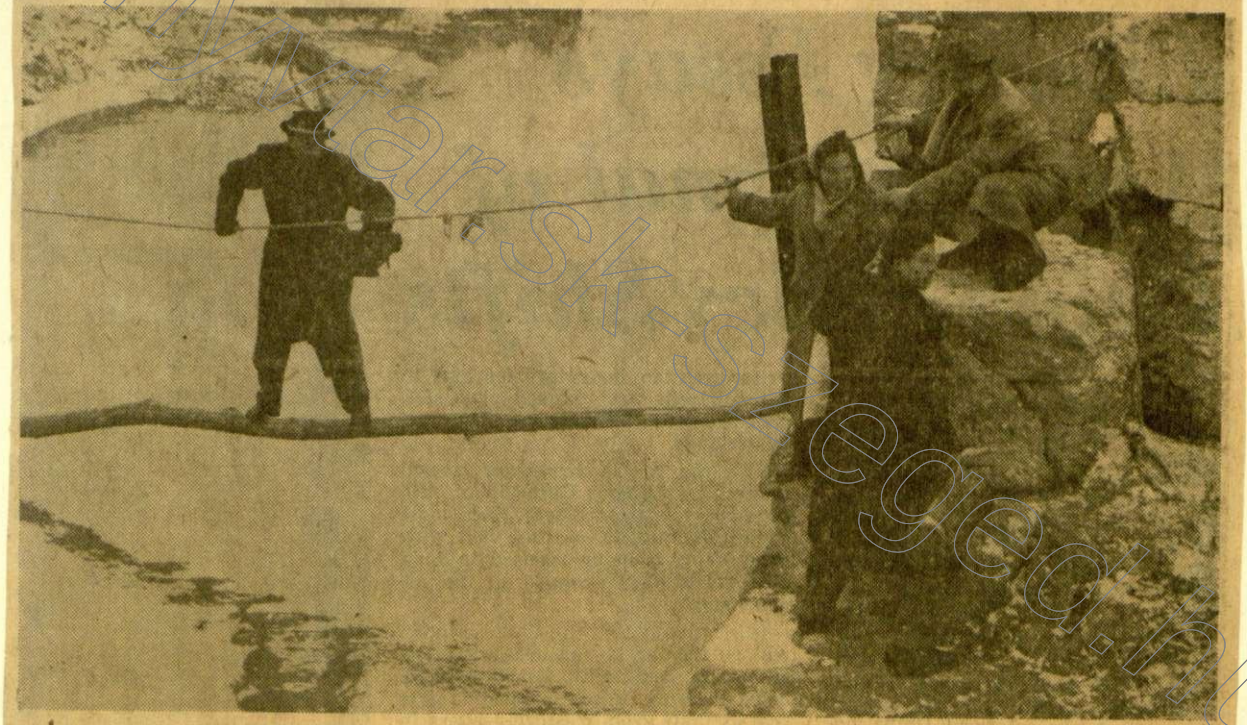
More importantly, however, some 3 million Hungarians travel abroad each year, to the West, under the bloc's liberal travel policy. The lack of such travel opportunities is a major rub to populations in many other Communist nations.

A Hungarian can go abroad every two years if someone on the outside pays the bill, and every three years using his own money to buy the tickets. He is allowed to draw $175 of scarce Western currency from the national bank.

Shops seem well stocked. While the average salary here officially is only $1,800 a year, the economic reforms have made some people rather comfortable. Many others are unhappy at the disparity.

Officially, only about 2 per cent of the work force can operate small private service businesses such as repair shops, which are inefficient for the state to operate. Yet, as is the case in Yugoslavia, there is a lot of moonlighting—by doctors as well as servicemen.

Bankers do not deny that there are more than 10,000 people here with the equivalent of $50,000 in the bank. Western newspapers and magazines are available at the big hotels here, enough for awareness among Hungarian officials and intellectuals of what is going on in the West.



Associated Press

across a canal to Austria in November of that year. The photo at left was by a Czech photographer.

The police apparatus is still in place, but it is not used as it was. "There are no more knocks on the door at midnight, after which you don't see your family for five years," said a middle-aged Budapest resident.

There is, however, a price.

"There are three very clear limits to our relative freedom, and we all know it," says a Hungarian. "The basic tenets of socialism and foreign policy interest shall not be questioned or attacked, and there shall be no pornography.

"There is no formal censorship, but it is built-in and everybody knows it. If you write something, the censor may tell you to take it out while he is winking at you. But he makes you take it out nevertheless," says a writer.

"The rule is you can talk about problems as long as you don't blame them on communism."

Hungary's sometimes black humor is kept marginally alive in the political cabaret. A rare New Year's Eve televised performance parodied Kadar.

However, the past 20 years have produced here what some foreign diplomats feel is massive apathy that tends to be overlooked in the sometimes frothy image of Budapest as a pleasure isle in the midst of communism. Other experienced Westerners call it "realism."

Hungary has a longer history of association with the West than with communism, and attitudes here toward the Soviets seem to range from a deep hate in some circles to a certain justified gratitude among the bureaucrats, who owe their position in many cases to the Soviets. Others show respect, if not affection, for the Soviets.

There is no obvious attraction to American-style capitalism, which is not in Hungary's historical experience, either.

One politician suggests that if Hungarians had their choice, they would probably wind up with a Western European brand of socialism.

With some 800,000 of their relatives living in the United States, Hungarians have considerable emotional attachments to America, and great respect for its technology. There is also a reservoir of bitterness over 1956, which some Hungarians saw as a moment when the Americans might have helped.

The most bitter are those who feel that the U.S.-sponsored Radio Free Europe broadcasts helped whip the population into a frenzy of expectations that cost some 3,500 casualties.