



1956

Frederick Hier, 'A Hungarian Diary'

Citation:

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Summary:

Frederick ("Fritz") Hier was an American employee of Radio Free Europe. He led a team which entered Hungary on October 31 to report on the events of the Hungarian Revolution. Hier was joined by RFE journalists Gabor Tormay from the Hungarian Service, Jerzy Ponikiewicz from the Polish Service, and a journalist from South German Radio, who helped tape RFE interviews in return for transportation. They reported the Revolution from Győr and nearby cities and interviewed heads of local revolutionary councils.

Original Language:

English

Contents:

Original Scan

A HUNGARIAN DIARY

Fritz Nier

SATURDAY, OCT. 27:

The Revolution is already four days old by the time I arrive in Vienna. First reports reached the West just two days ago, but most of the news dispatches are incomplete and the significance of the story is not yet known. I am even less in the picture, having spent the last 10 days in Berlin trying to get information on the Polish revolt.

Two minutes in the Vienna Radio Free Europe office and I am like a well-shaken bottle of fizz water. Our people have been on the border since Thursday and they are so excited — especially the Hungarians — that you can hardly talk to them.

A quick briefing and we are off for Rickelsdorf, a small Austrian border village on the main road to Budapest. "Main road" is a loose use of the term: it hasn't been traveled much in the past 10 years.

But it's in full use now! Rickelsdorf itself is packed with cars and people, the curious down for a look-see, officials from every organization imaginable and news correspondents from all over Europe. And on the Hungarian side, cars and people are racing back and forth from Hegyeshalom, the nearest Hungarian town to the border and the counterpart to Rickelsdorf.

It's about a mile between the Austrian and Hungarian customs houses. The Austrians are trying to keep order and prevent people from going over to the Hungarian side, but they are fighting a losing battle.

In the Hungarian customs house the situation is chaotic. The "Freedom Fighters" are in full command and yet there's really no one in charge. The Communist guards have either fled or been locked up. Border patrols have been abandoned. All flags and hammer and sickle signs have been torn down. Freedom Fighters have ripped the red stars and other army insignia from their uniforms and each wears a tiny bit of the red-white-green cloth in its place, pinned to his cap or lapel. All the rebels are armed, saying that they got their weapons from army and police arsenals.

All of us, as westerners, are more than welcome. "Come on in," we are told. "Come see what we are doing and tell the world. But we need help. When is help coming? Food and medicines. There are thousands of dead and dying. Medicines and blood."

As we ourselves hardly know what's going on, our answers are non-committal. But help is coming. Already, Red Cross trucks and ambulances are coming in from Vienna, laden with supplies. They are waved through both the border barriers and their loads then transferred at the Hungarian customs house to Hungarian trucks.

As the evening wears on the Hungarian vehicles come over to the Austrian side to load up. Their drivers are unshaven and red-eyed. Some haven't slept in two or three days. They crowd into the tiny Gasthaus for a sandwich, coffee or a schnaps, and we crowd around them seeking information. But it's a 50-50 exchange, for the Hungarians are as hungry for news from us as we are for information from them.

A handful of Freedom Fighters are drunk, but it's a combination of happiness and alcohol. And there are a few who are bitter. "Where the hell's your help, West? Where are your tanks and planes? Are we supposed to beat the Russians all by ourselves?"

Diary

Page 3

There's no answer to this one. Food and medicine, yes. But tanks and planes...

We work most of the night, phoning Vienna as we get something new. About an hour's sleep in the car.

SUNDAY, OCT. 28:

A day of interviewing and phoning. Our orders forbid us to go into Hungary so we must be content with talking to truck drivers and Freedom Fighters at the two customs houses. There are rumors of a thousand things, but they are difficult to pin down. Communications are all but non-existent inside Hungary so that the people in Hegyeshalom don't know for sure what's going on in other parts of the country.

I see the first buses and trucks from Budapest, out to pick up supplies, and their drivers report heavy fighting in the capital city. They say the Hungarian army is deserting wholesale to the rebels and the Revolution is picking up momentum everywhere.

Aid is picking up, too, and vehicles are now pouring into Niekelsdorf from all over Austria. A bakery sends down three of its trucks loaded with bread. We hear of drug firms cleaning their shelves. And private citizens are emptying their pantries and medicine closets.

But conspicuously missing: the Americans. Where is our aid? The United States Escapee Program and the voluntary church agencies? The Embassy in Vienna?

I must turn away from people, Austrian as well as Hungarian, when asked this question.

We spend the night, without thoughts of sleep, helping unload and load trucks at the Hungarian customs house. We almost forget that we are supposed to be reporters and that this is a news story. It's so much more than that...

Diary

page 4

There are vehicles by the hundreds, now, waiting to take relief supplies back into Hungary.

MONDAY, OCT. 23:

Wanting to see border points other than Nickelsdorf-Hegyeshalom, we head south toward Sopron, checking the situation at such Austrian frontier villages as Klingenberg and Schattendorf.

Again (or still) the crowds, confusion and excitement. It is hard to remain dry-eyed watching the Austrians and their aid to the Hungarians. Cars, wagons, bicycles and rucksacks are crammed full or piled high with foodstuffs and medicine. The ultimate is a black-shawled peasant woman, easily 75, walking a mile to get to the Hungarian border barrier, where she hands over to a Freedom Fighter a half a loaf of black bread. And then shuffles back the mile again to Austrian territory.

At the Sopron customs house, I ask a German woman from Munich what persuaded her and her husband to drive some 300 miles to bring medical supplies. "We visited Hungary once before the war," she said, "and met so many lovely people." As we talked, she stood there ankle-deep in mud, with a poodle on a leash and with tears running down her face.

I interviewed a border guard who had deserted to the rebels, but he was not very friendly or cooperative. I suspected him of being an opportunist who had perhaps swung over to save his neck. Then he said simply and without dramatics:

"I have lived under the Russians for 10 years. Now we have driven them out. We will never let them back again. We will all die first."

Noting his cold, dark eyes and the machine pistol slung over his shoulder, I felt sorry for any Russian that might some day try to come back into Sopron...

Diary

page 5

Another long evening on the border -- and embarrassment piled on embarrassment at the lack of a single American, either with two legs or four wheels, there to help. At mid-night long-distance and emotional phone calls to Embassy and Consular friends in Vienna and Salzburg asking where blood-donors or food-suppliers might be. And then rage at being told that the American Ambassador has forbidden any employee (or his wife) to give blood or contribute so much as a single can of Heins soup.

I am wung out, and for the first time in my life, ashamed of my green passport. There can't be political implications that prevent a person from giving a pint of blood!

TUESDAY, OCT. 30:

By mid-day, both Hungarian and Austrian restrictions have been lifted and the press corps pours into Hungary. Only we of RFE are left in Nickelsdorf and our only subjects for interview are a few Austrian customs men and the Gasthaus owner.

We return to Vienna to plea for permission to go in. Isn't this the moment that RFE, especially, has waited for for almost six years?

WEDNESDAY, OCT 31:

The boss flies down from Munich to see for himself and by noon he gives approval. We can go in!

Four teams are made up, mine consisting of the group that has been working together for the past several days: Gaber Tormay, our Hungarian RFE interviewer in Vienna; Jerry Ponikiewski, our Polish jack-of-all-trades, who knows more about Hungary than most Hungarians; Kurt Kofron, a German from the Süddeutsche Rundfunk, who will make tapes for us in return for transportation; and myself.

Diary

page 6

Our "target" is Győr, an industrial city of 60,000, about 40 miles inside Hungary. Other teams go in to Sopron and Szentgotthard to the south. All of us are forbidden to go as far as Budapest; first, because of the possibility of falling into Russian hands (and the sensitivity of our APB accreditation); and second, because the press of the world is already there giving more than adequate coverage. We are to go into the provinces as an area untouched by other newsmen.

A disappointment that Budapest is "off limits," but we don't stop to quibble. We buy 12 cartons of cigarettes, 400 chocolate bars, American flags, maps, flashlights, etc. and take off from Vienna at 3:30 p.m.

Formalities at the border are hardly formalities at all, even though we have no visas (the Hungarian Legation in Vienna has been closed tight for some time past). Our passports are stamped and over we go.

The simple case of it -- and the irony, after sitting on the western side for almost eight years and interviewing refugees who fled through barbed wire and mines and post patrols and man-hunting dogs...

Ours is a swift and silent ride as we travel over an excellent road in the gathering dusk. I am surprised that the road is so good and conducive to the detriment of the Russians that they have done as Hitler did with his super highways -- built and maintained them for military purposes.

There is little talk, each of us lost in our own thoughts. It is difficult for me to remember later what I was thinking: "So this is what it's like ... my first free European country...after years of writing and talking about western lands...so different yet that the country villages in other European countries... can I really say that it seems more drab?...wait until we talk to the people."

Diary

page 7

There is a Freedom Fighter roadblock at Nagyashalon, but we are waved through when we show the American flag. There are buses and trucks, civilian and army, everywhere, but they are all in "friendly hands." People are waving all along the route, children, their parents and grandparents.

We are stopped again in Moson Magyaróvár, where we ask for the location of the massacre that took place there on October 25. Several people are eager to show us and finally a young boy is delegated to be our guide.

We are told how, on the 25th, 600 people marched out to the AVH (secret police) headquarters for no other purpose than to ask for removal of the huge red star on the side of the building. As the crowd got nearer, a frantic AVH officer gave the order to shoot and machine guns fired into the unarmed marchers. People turned and fled in panic but the shooting continued. Hand-grenades were thrown from the second-story windows and added to the casualties. Eighty-two were killed, including women and children, and some 100 wounded. A woman who lived in a house 100 yards away came out to investigate the noise and she, too, was mowed down, along with the baby she held in her arms.

It is a sobering and shuddering experience being shown around the area where this slaughter took place. A soldier, who defected to the rebels, then tells us that the lieutenant who gave the order to fire was hung that same night by infuriated villagers. The captain of the barracks is reported as having fled in civilian disguise to Czechoslovakia.

We take a few pictures of the red star -- which was eventually torn down and broken up under-foot -- and continue on to Győr.

There is only one hotel, the name of which is at the moment uncertain. Before the Communist regime it was the Hotel

Diary

page 8

Royale. Then it became the Red Star (Vörös Csillag). But several days ago the Red Star sign was torn down and most people are referring to it as the Royale again.

The lobby is full and hub-bubbing. We have to wait in line before we can get rooms, assigned to us by a young desk clerk who is sleepless but happy to see so many westerners. "I am sorry for my bad English," he apologizes to us, "but I haven't had much practice recently."

The rest of the evening is spent interviewing and writing up notes.

THURSDAY, NOV. 1:

Our first task is to get an interview with Attila Szigethy, who is head of the Győr -- and Transdanubian area -- National Council. The Town Hall is right across the street from our hotel window, a large and ornate building, but dirty and gray-looking in the cold October weather. Scores of people are trying to get in the front entrance, where uniformed and armed guards are checking identity documents. Our western ones get us in immediately.

Directed upstairs, the way is wide open to us as foreign newsmen. Actually, too many people are too eager to help, or at least too eager to talk to us. In fact, there are altogether too many people all over the place. There is bedlam in one after another of the rooms into which we are shown. Furniture is disarranged; what were once probably files are now corners piled high with papers; telephones are jangling constantly; and the babel of voices is overwhelming.

It is difficult to find anyone in charge. Scores of people come forward with offers to help, but more often than not they represent some particular group or have a personal axe to grind. Their eagerness to talk to someone from the West is almost pathetic.

Diary

page 9

Professors, factory workers, students, coal miners, former counts and countesses, they all come forward with some program or plan. It is obvious that they have been mute so long that they cannot wait to spill out what's been on the minds these many years.

And the variety of languages! In the space of half an hour I was addressed in English, French, German and Serbian, besides Hungarian.

During the only 30-second lull in the morning's proceedings, a tiny old woman came up to me timidly. "I saw you looking around," she said in almost perfect English. "I'm sorry that picture of Lenin is still on the wall. You see, we have so much more important work to do that we haven't had time to take him down."

We are finally granted an interview with Szigethy. He is a stout man in his fifties, whose most distinguishing feature is a great walrus mustache. His dress stands out in the crowd; a midnight blue double-breasted suit and what almost looks like an oxford button-down shirt without the button-downs. But he is dead tired and seems bewildered by his sudden prominence. Several groups of newsmen have preceded us, others join us during our interview and we heard later that still more came to see him. It isn't unreasonable to assume that this former peasant party man had never before granted an interview to western correspondents.

Szigethy identified himself as a supporter of Imre Nagy and said that he agreed that Hungary should have free elections and immediate withdrawal of the Russians. But he hesitated on the political future of the country, eventually saying that a "Gomulka-type" government seemed the most likely to succeed.

All in all, the interview was not very successful, both because of the almost interminable interruptions and the interpreting difficulties. But the main reason was undoubtedly Szigethy's own vagueness.

Diary

page 10

We then visited the local hospital to see how western medicines were being distributed. It was a large, new building and spotlessly clean. Friendly doctors, interns and nurses were glad to show us about. The medical dispensary was overflowing with newly arrived boxes and crates. White-coated nurses, sometimes on their hands and knees, were sorting them out.

Seventeen of the Russian Magyarev wounded were in this hospital. In one room were four young boys, all of them suffering from wounds in the back or backs of their legs.

"They were shot in the back as they turned to flee," a doctor explained.

We were beckoned into a separate room by a 16-year-old girl. She was lovely and stared at us with bright, clear eyes. She was shot in the spine with a dum-dum bullet and it had come out her stomach, taking all her intestines with it.

"She will die in a few hours," the doctor said.

We were shaken by the time we left. I tried to call Vienna but couldn't get through, and so had to drive out to Nischladorf to phone in our stories.

FRIDAY, NOV. 21

Wanting to talk to as many segments of the population as possible, we drove about 30 minutes to Tatabanya, the coal mining area. I have never seen what I'd call a spic-and-span coal mining town, but this city of 60,000 seemed especially bleak and depressing. The city is spread out for about five miles on each side of the winding road that runs through it. Long rows of workers' houses stood just one deep on each side of the road, with no apparent center of the city or main shopping district. The phrase is a ridiculous one -- main shopping district. We saw little but coal mines.

A phone call had preceded us and we were expected. We went

Diary

page 11

immediately to National Council headquarters, now housed in what had previously been the Communist Party HQ. The building was spacious—recently painted and somewhat resembled an Austrian villa. It stood out in its surrounding like the Lincoln Memorial in the middle of a slum.

Inside a scene of total disarray. Everything "Communist" had been tossed in corners and piled high all around — books, papers, literature of all kinds, phonograph records, statuettes, etc. "Take a souvenir, if you like," we were told. "It's all junk."

A dozen officials crowded around us and led us up into the ex-boss's office on the second floor. It was a luxurious room, with wall-to-wall carpeting, a great maple desk and a conference table and leather-covered doors. We asked for a description of the ousted CP chief, but our hosts laughed.

"We only saw him once in three years, at a Party meeting. We don't even know his name. No one knows where he lived or whether he was married or single. But he did drive a big Mercedes car and we found his salary book in his desk: he earned 28,000 forint a month (a skilled worker made from 1,200 to 1,400)."

The nameless Party chief had disappeared in the first hours of the uprising, but no one knew where to, or cared.

We were with the National Council people for more than two hours and listened to excited talk about a new Hungary and worker solidarity. There was some disunity about what the future might bring, but there was absolute unanimity in the group's hatred of the Russians and Communism.

Before we left we pledged to take a message to the World Trades Union on Hungarian worker opposition to the Soviets and protesting against their presence in Hungary.

We were then asked to go to the local radio station to broadcast brief messages to the local population. We were told that

Diary

page 12

we were the first westerners to visit Fatabanya in years and that what we had to say would be a moral boost to the people. We said our few ineffectual words in a primitive studio, but the station staff wept as we spoke. So did we.

Hoping to meet and talk with miners, we went to a small unkempt coffee house, one of the few in town. We made tape interviews with several old men, but then made the "mistake" of bringing out our chocolate bars. The coffee house was swamped in a matter of minutes. Afraid of some real damage to the premises, we moved out into the street, but that was even worse. We had started by giving the bars to children only, but soon grown-ups were begging for them, too.

We were men from Mars, but it was not such fun being from another planet. There was an uncomfortable edge in the Hungarians being so desperately poor. We were almost glad to get away.

A slow, dark and snowy ride back to Győr. We saw a Russian Zis limousine smashed against a tree along side the road, but it was empty and stripped of all its equipment. And then we saw a convoy of American cars pass us going in the direction of Budapest.

The significance of the convoy didn't come though to us until we got back to the hotel. A BBC man told us that he had been stopped by Russian tanks at Magyarovar on the way out to Vienna. Others in the hotel reported similar experiences. The American convoy had also been turned back.

When I phoned through to our office that evening I had to say that it looked as though the Russians had cut us off. But the radio was still broadcasting about the Soviet withdrawal, so we weren't too concerned.

SATURDAY, NOV. 3:

Our first real day "imprisoned." And yet no comprehension of what it might mean or lead to. We spend the day interviewing and talking to people. Russian tank movements through Győr, both to and

Diary

page 13

from the border, cause much speculation and rumor, but the Russians continue to announce that the tanks are merely for the protection of Russian occupation personnel who will be evacuated. It is probably the desire to believe this which leads the Hungarians and us to continue our work, the former trying to bring order out of revolutionary chaos and we trying to report on it.

At our request, a "press room" has been made available to us in the former Chamber of Commerce building which is now the HQ of the Revolutionary Council. All arranged by Gabor, the former hotel porter who had once been a bright young university graduate with a promising future. But his orientation and sympathies were too western, and he was reduced to portering. The Revolution gave him an new chance and his language talents brought him the job as press chief. He is humble about it, but you can see that he's proud and happy. And he's pathetically eager to help.

Although there is no phone in the room -- the thing we need most -- there is an enormous combination radio-phonograph-tape recorder that somehow symbolizes "press." Nor are there any typewriters, but we have our own. We ask for paper and get printed sheets of Communist directives -- but the back sides are blank and can serve for typing notes. "I'm terribly sorry," says Gabor, "but I guess we're not very well organized yet." The understatement of the year but we vastly appreciate the thought.

At another meeting with National Council chairman Snigethy we ask whether there isn't some way we can be allowed to leave; mightn't he give us a Hungarian document that would get us through the Russian road blocks? Again, confusion and embarrassment from this former regime official, swept up in the Revolution. He would like to help us, but knows he is helpless until the Russians make their intentions clear.

A group of frustrated English newsmen decide not to wait any longer and take off again for Budapest, from whence they had

Diary

page 14

come the day before. Eight others, including the three of us from RFE for whom Budapest is out-of-bounds, remain in the hotel.

At 11:00 p.m. I get a phone call through to Vienna for what eventually proves to be the last time. Our people there tell us not to worry, that they'll get us out "somehow." Worry is the least of our pastimes; we're so busy collecting and writing up information that we've hardly thought of our predicament. As I'm talking on the phone, a column of 11 Russian tanks rumbles by outside the window and as a joke I put the receiver outside for the Vienna people to listen. The tanks continue on toward the border.

That night in our room we discuss the situation, but still feel that we're in a good position to report on what is going on. In bed by 01:30 and a sound sleep.

SUNDAY, NOV. 4:

We are all awakened at 05:45 by the clanking and roar of Russian tanks and other heavy vehicles. Beneath our windows mile-long columns pass by, but unlike those of past days, these disperse throughout the city. One group of tanks turns left over the bridge to the railroad station, another deploys at all four corners of the Town Hall, scores form our hotel. Tanks and cannons take up positions at all street intersections.

We all realize it without saying it: Győr has been occupied.

A mixture of feelings, standing at the windows in our pajamas, watching this parade of might. At first cold anger at this betrayal. Then I find myself muttering the worst obscenities. And waiting jumpily for the sounds of shooting.

One is guilty, too, of thoughts of self-preservation: what should we do? Pack our bags? Go back to bed? Run for it? Take a bath?

Diary

page 15

Another first reaction is to phone the news through to Vienna but I find that all the phones are dead. Along with the railway station and the town hall, the telephone center was a first target.

The Russians are methodical and well-trained. Officers and men are in complete charge in what we estimate to be not much more than half an hour. There were no disturbances. Not a single shot was fired.

We learned later that morning that our German colleague, Kurt, may have been personally responsible for the prevention of bloodshed. On his way down the hotel corridor, just after the Russians entered the city, he saw two half-crazed Freedom Fighters trying desperately to open a window. They had their machine guns in their hands and were babbling excitedly about "Russkie, Russkie..." Kurt ran for help and another Hungarian came and disarmed the two men. There is no telling what might have happened if they had once started shooting...

I decide to take that bath after all. Who knows when the next one might be possible.

At 08:00 a knock on the door. A boy from the desk. "You wished to be awakened at eight, sir." Incredible. How he imagined we could have slept through more than two hours of Russian... Well, God bless him. There's still order. Let's hope it's symbolic.

After breakfast -- with the tanks and their Mongolian occupants just a few yards away outside the hotel coffee room -- we return upstairs for a council of war (which is really what it amounts to). We decide to report directly to the Russians for permission to leave. A 15-minute walk to HQ -- the Kommandatura -- is in vain and we are told to "come back tomorrow."

By this time it is 09:30, a hazy, half-sunny day. Streets and squares are packed with people, dancing and watching

Diary

page 16

silently. Many old familiar faces -- people who in the past few days have pressed letters in our hands or queried us on a thousand different topics -- slowly group around us again. The language barrier is no longer a barrier at all: their looks ask the questions. What does this mean? What's going to happen?

As though we could answer!

It is not the technical fact that we don't know that makes us retreat upstairs to our rooms. We can't face those faces..

But there's no avoiding them. Our room becomes a mecca for scores of people, from the streets and from among the guests, most of whom are refugees from Budapest who have got as far as Győr and were then cut off. We, as westerners, represent aid and/or strength. You'd almost think we were going to hand out machine guns or magic-wand our electric razors into secret weapons.

We dispense what "cheer" we can in the form of "Don't worry, wait and see, perhaps they'll go away."

Perhaps they'll go away ...

Most of the hotel toilets are stopped up. We tore up all our notes and destroyed tapes and negatives, but others had the idea first. We even found pistols and some loose cartridges in some of the toilet bowls. I took the pistols out, but where do you hide them? I went to the top floor and dropped them into the water reservoirs of the toilets there, my imperturbable logic being that Russian soldiers won't know the fine points of plumbing, anyway.

Lunch in the dining room is a silent, methodical affair. A few whispers but the squeaking of waiters' shoes and the ping of soup spoons on a plate are the loudest noises.

At 2 p.m. we notice an Austrian Red Cross convoy going through town in the direction of the border, with two "civilian" cars tagging along on the end of it. A way for us, too!

Diary

page 17

We give what's left of our money, cigarettes and soap to people in the hotel and race after the convey. But we are all stopped by a tank roadblock at Mosen Magyarovar, some 12 miles from the border. Back in front of the hotel in 6-5r we are besieged by the crowds again; they are especially disturbed at our being refused exit.

The people to whom we'd given our few supplies return them to us, over our protests. One woman from Budapest, who had been stuck in the hotel with us for three days, apologized as she said: "I hope you'll understand. I'm so glad to see you back again

Not exactly our sentiments, but somehow a boost to our morale.

MONDAY, NOV. 5r

Following yesterday's instructions, we return to the Kommandatura to talk to the Russians. Gabor and I are chosen to represent the group. A block away from the building, which was formerly an AVH barracks, several people stop us. "Don't go in there," they say. "You'll never get out. They'll arrest you for sure. Others already have been." Smirking but there is no choice.

A sentry escorts us into a front hall and asks us to wait. Some 50 Hungarians are milling about. In the 15 minutes we have to survey them we decide that most are here on a mission similar to ours -- an appeal to be allowed to leave. But there are a few others, too, "reporting for duty," those whose hour has now come again, the Communists and collaborators.

Thus the hall is a combination of faces: the desperate and the self-confident.

We are finally shown upstairs, passing on the way littera of furniture and papers thrown and jammed into the corners. The result of a "cleansing action" by the Russians or the left-overs of defiant Freedom Fighters?

Diary

page 18

Lenin is conspicuously on the wall in two places in the large room we're ushered into. A silent curse for the old bastard, who is directly responsible for our predicament. At the same time, quite honestly, a sense of excitement: "So this is what it's like." We are now among the how-many-millions? who have thus stood before a Russian Commissar... And also, quite honestly, sweaty palms.

We are taken into a smaller room up the hall, to be heard by a Colonel, with a Major as interpreter, in German. Although the building is well heated, the officers and soldiers never remove their huge coats. They seem wrapped in them like great bears. "The Russian Bear." The Colonel is massive, with his fur cap adding to his stature, and he has a hole-like scar on his left cheek-bone. The Major, also hatted, is small and compact.

Our interrogation lasts almost two hours. The questioning is disorganized, without pattern. Oftentimes our answers are only half translated or not translated at all. But it soon becomes evident that the chaotic form of our interview is going to our disadvantage. What comes out of our mouths as a simple, straightforward self-evidence, gets to the Colonel as a suspicious irregularity.

"You say you are an American?"

"Yes, Sir, as shown in my passport."

Whispered consultation between the Major and the General.

Triumphantly: "But your passport was issued in Salzburg, Austria!"

"Yes, Sir, our passports are valid for four years only and I have been abroad for seven years. I had it renewed at the American Consulate in Sal..."

Interruption. Consultation. A notation on a piece of paper. Further attempts to explain are shrugged off.

And then 15 minutes of careful scrutiny of all the border stamps in my passport.

Diary

page 19

Suspiciously: "Where are your visas for Sweden, England, France and Italy?"

"I have none. You see Americans don't need visas in European..."

"I understand no Russian but can repeat the Major's next translation word-for-word. "Ah-ha, this man has no visas for any country!"

Rising anger at these clowns. How can they be so bloody stupid? I start to babble forth an explanation of at least this simple point, but am told to cut it off. Is this part of their interrogation technique or are they really so uninformed? I'm sure it's the latter, but it is still maddening to be always on the defensive.

"Well, you need a visa to get to Moscow," the Major tells me with a sardonic grin. I feel like asking him whether he's sign a notarised statement to that effect should they decide to take us east instead of letting us go to the west.

After a seemingly endless time with my passport, I am asked to show my press credentials. It would be folly, in view of their thoroughness, to hide my RFE identity.

Their reaction to "Radio Free Europe" is comparatively mild. Asked why we broadcast to the east, I said probably for the same reason Radio Moscow broadcasts to the west. This was not translated for the Colonel but he didn't seem to care.

The formalities with Gabor, an exile from Hungary but with an Austrian passport, were surprisingly short.

Then, quite cordially: "You understand that we are busy bringing order to Győr. Return to your hotel and wait. But do not leave the hotel, for your own sake, mostly. There are still some reactionary elements about. Find yourselves some drink, if you can, and women, too. You will leave us soon as things are stabilised."

Diary

page 20

A lot of bowing and thanking and shaking hands. We leave the Kommandatura feeling elated. "The old boys won't be so bad after all."

A quick sobering up as we walk back through streets filled with tanks and soldiers, and Hungarian faces.

We report back to our six colleagues and the rest of the day is spent talking and speculating.

TUESDAY, NOV. 6:

Resigned to a period of waiting, we double our efforts to get a radio. Everyone is asking us what's happening and we're probably the least well informed. We've been listening to the only radio in the hotel, in the kitchen, but it's embarrassing to ask the kitchen help to turn off a Hungarian-language news broadcast so that we can listen to Vienna or the BBC.

The blond bookkeeper, Kati, who works behind the desk in the lobby, hears of our search and gives us her private radio. She has been a constant source of help and now this sacrifice.

News reports confirm that what is happening in Győr is happening throughout the whole country: defiance of the Russians. There is open fighting in many areas, passive but unyielding resistance in others. What keeps these people going against such overwhelming odds that they are no odds at all?

We need only look at the Hungarians in our room and listen to them talk to know the answer. It is "now or never" with them. They have come this far and there is no turning back. "Turn back to what?" as a young student puts it to us. "Communism? Never. We will all die first, and expect our families to die, before we'll live with this false system."

These are thrilling words to hear from students -- the very group we had all but given up for lost. Lost, indeed! They triggered off this whole business.

Radio Vienna, RFE and the BBC all report "heavy fighting" in Budapest and Győr. We all have the same worry: our families, which know we're stuck here. To our knowledge there has not yet been a shot fired in Győr. In the streets outside, the striking but docile population mills about all day long until the 6 p.m. curfew. The Russians, dirty and Buddha-like, sit astride their great tanks. As we watch them hour after hour, during the day and at night, one wonders how they keep warm in their "iron houses"; when and what do they eat?; where do they shave?; are there toilets in tanks?

At 12:30 our same Colonel and Major show up in our room and take down pertinent name, passport, etc. data from each of us individually. We are all a bit edgy, especially about the eight birthplaces appearing on a single piece of paper. Five of us were born behind the Iron Curtain: Budapest, Prague, Warsaw, Tallin (Estonia), and the Banat region of Rumania. The other three are New York City (me, Basle, Switzerland and Baden-Baden, West Germany.

But if the Russians noted anything, they didn't let on. The whole performance is business-like, and at the same time cordial. When they are finished, the Major says someone will come "in a couple of hours" and arrange for our departure.

We are elated and nip the last of our schnaps to celebrate. Our Hungarian friends, still coming to our room, watch us in silence.

The afternoon wears on and no one comes. The Hungarians let it be known that they're not surprised.

By dusk it's obvious that we're here for another day.

Wednesday, NOV. 7:

There's heavy rain in the morning. But the population is out in the streets again, watching and waiting, wrapped in their old, ill-fitting coats and most of them wearing blue berets.

Kurt, standing at the rain-splattered window, says sadly: "I'd always heard Russian tanks were made out of cardboard. I'm afraid they aren't."

Diary

page 22

The loudspeaker in the square starts blaring at 10:00. People listen for a few minutes, but when the announcer says that the Russians have been successful in ridding the country of "fascists and provocateurs," they laugh, whistle and walk away. This performance is repeated a half-dozen times throughout the day.

It is 99 per cent of the people that were the "fascists and provocateurs" against Communist and Russian rule.

In a low mood, we take an inventory of our supplies and ration out our remaining cigarettes, chocolate and soap. We collect all our used razor blades, sharing stories we've heard about people in Russia shaving with tin cans and axe blades.

Jerry suggests saving the red cellophane openers from cigarette packages, "to decorate our Christmas tree in Siberia."

The dining room at lunch has another new set of faces. They change every day, as new groups make their way west from Budapest, spend the night in Győr and then continue their flight towards Austria.

Our afternoon conference is on the same subject. Shall we join them on foot? Our "western look" (my crew out!), the more than 40 miles to the border and trigger-happy soldiers speak out against it. Still, why the delay on the part of the Russians? Are they checking in Moscow (or Budapest) on who we might be? We're obviously unimportant to the Russians and really a bother, but will the political officers arrive in Győr soon and decide that a Radio Free Europe hostage...

We draft a letter in German addressed to the Kommandatura, pointing out yesterday's promise of departure in "a few hours." Our Swiss member, Pulver, takes the letter to the Russians, but is back shortly. A Colonel had refused to accept the letter and told Pulver to come back and check again six days hence, on the 13th!

Diary

page 23

Our morale sinks to its lowest point. Another week! No one can even stand to look at our chessboard, which had been a constant source of diversion since our first day.

Now was it any fun watching two of our closest friends leave today, one west, one east. Gabor, the *partier-come-press-chief-come-partier*, days his name in on the wanted list. It would be folly for him to stay, and yet we watched a man with a broken heart leave our room and walk down the hall.

The other is a man who has given us a continuous lift these past few days -- "The Minister." So had we nick-named him; he is in reality a simple worker. But he is a clever one, too, and had been a man of prominence in his factory. When the Revolution started he became a member of the Budapest Workers' Council and he had come to Győr in that capacity. We dubbed him "Minister" because of his current role as a sort of bat-man for a non-Communist politician. He spoke fluent Russian and was running rings around Soviet bureaucracy, getting fake documents and pulling off incredible things under the Russians' noses.

He was a small, wiry man, about 38, and always wore a ridiculous wool tassel-cap. He had been in the middle of the heaviest fighting in Budapest and spoke of the Russians with complete scorn. Now he was returning to fight again.

Was it bravery or scorn? Both probably, but his utter contempt of the Soviets was something to see. He referred to them as "monkeys" and "idiots," and even when addressing them (as we had seen him do) he talked to them as you do to the naughty children of unfriendly neighbors, deprecatingly, condescendingly, firmly.

Before Gabor, the *partier*, left we gave him a message to be phoned into our Vienna office: "All well and no danger." We didn't add "yet" and asked him not to. We have been sending messages out by everyone who has left, but have any of our "couriers" gotten through?

THURSDAY, NOV. 8:

A tense, unhappy day. We are forced to sit and wait while a half dozen of our Hungarian friends go scouting to find out what escape possibilities there are. Their reports are not very cheerful. There are tank blocks on all roads leading out of Győr. It is impossible to get a Hungarian document that might get us past the Russians. The train to Sopron, near the border, is "most probably" controlled by either Hungarians or Russians or both.

Imprisoned and watching from our window, we can still see hordes of Hungarians who are obviously in the process of fleeing. Many carry battered suitcases or rucksacks. Baby carriages are loaded with sacks and bags, with children being carried in their parents' arms. Wheel-barrow, small carts -- anything with wheels -- are piled with personal effects. And even a touch of the South Seas, though well-muffled: several people carrying packs on the tops of their heads!

But for everyone that leaves -- each for his own reason -- there are thousands who stay, and their reasons are the same: to fight on for the freedom they've longed for so long and had for such a short few days.

Two old miners, both over 60, come into our room. They have walked the 40 miles from Tatabánya to inform local authorities that they will not return to work until the Russians leave. They have nothing to lose -- just their pay-checks and the possibility of buying food, and maybe their lives.

They also tell us that our visit last week is still being talked about in Tatabánya. How the mighty have fallen: now we don't even have honeyed words that would supplement our chocolate bars of six days ago...

Another report in the afternoon: the bakers of Győr, having heard rumors that the workers in major factories were debating a return to work, have issued a proclamation -- they stop baking

Diary

page 25

bread if the workers return to their benches.

Defiance, defiance, defiance...

There are some signs of normal life, however, even though there is hardly anyone working. Many of the national flags and armbands have disappeared. Bus traffic has resumed, but there are no workers riding the buses. The traffic light below our window is working again, but it has almost no vehicles to control. The market place is open again and normal for the first time in days (with reports that the farmers have not raised a price a penny, even though food is already short). Most shops are still closed, but you can buy cigarettes and some other commodities at the "back door." Newspapers are being given out at many small kiosks; they are free, for the government is trying every means to reach its rebellious population.

And throughout the day more and more of our "friends" come up to say good-bye. They feel it is hopeless, and dangerous, to stay any longer. Each departure, whether west or east, brings the same tears and leaves the same emptiness. These brave, brave people...

Supper is made more interesting by the presence of four western newcomers -- two Egyptian business men, a white-Russian freelance journalist who says he works for "Paris Match" and an Austrian acting as guide and interpreter. We're eager to talk to them, but they are close-mouthed. They do admit that they've come out from Budapest. We speculate that the two Egyptians were probably in Hungary negotiating for arms for Nasser and then got snuck caught up in the Revolution.

The four are put out by their detainment, but hopeful of getting permission to leave tomorrow. It ought to be interesting: the Egyptians, yes, but will the Russians give an exit permit to one of their former citizens, the "Paris Match" man? Or is he really that?

A cause for prancing and back-slapping after hearing a 6 p.m. RFE broadcast: the code message, "Dapla ist gut angekommen." That's our portier friend, Gabor. It means he has arrived in Vienna

Diary

page 26

and has informed our families that we're all well. Thank God we can relax some on that score!

FRIDAY, NOV. 9:

A bit of comic relief -- and necessity -- as we get a barber to come to the room and go through a round of haircuts. And "round" is about what they are, at least in back. Winkler, the Berlin photographer, takes pictures of us all and, as a long-hair, even condescends to have his hair cut like mine.

Big news at 11:00. Seven other newsmen, coming out from Budapest, get stopped in Győr and sent to our hotel. Their cars and equipment were confiscated, unlike ours, which we still have in our possession. I know two of the seven (six Englishmen and Ernie Leiser of CBS), but the group is mighty unhappy about being stopped and is afraid of being identified with us -- especially me as RFE.

The others more or less go their own way and start hounding the Kommandatura for permission to continue to Vienna. We alter our escape plans, feeling that flight might hurt their chances; and besides, there is safety in numbers, although we kick this point around a good deal.

We have had a report in the morning to cut down our talk over coffee -- the AVE men are a-foot again. There are also several stories of arrests beginning. Our Swiss confirmed this yesterday when he saw long lists of Hungarian names on a desk at the Russian HQ. Our friends in the hotel -- those that haven't yet fled -- warn us that we might be next. But they have no solution to our quandry. We're stuck.

So, apparently, are the Egyptians. They arrive back today, having been turned back at the border by the Russians, despite their passes from the Győr commandant. They are more silent than ever, but still confident that they'll get this "misunderstanding" cleared up tomorrow.

Diary

page 27

There is a big Russian withdrawal late at night: 27 tanks and other heavy equipment, going in the direction of Komarov and Lake Balaton, away from the border. But if it is secured, why can't we be allowed through?

Although it "loses a little something in the translation," we think the funniest remark of our stay to date is that made by Jerry who, in the middle of the night, asks for a flashlight in order to identify the numbers on the tanks as they pass in the darkness.

SATURDAY, NOV. 10¹

I've rarely ever smoked before breakfast, but I can hardly wait these days to light up in the morning. A sign of the times?

Food at the hotel continues to be more than adequate, although the diet of pig, in one form or another, is beginning to get monotonous. Nor are there any green vegetables, other than an occasional green pepper. But neither is this unusual in many European countries, where meat, potatoes and bread are the staple items.

If there's a little variety in the food, there is still a rapid turnover among those eating it. The refugees — for they already wear that label — continue to come and go.

The hotel and its restaurant, third-class under any system, are barely struggling along. At least half the help has vanished, most of them to the west. The dining room murals are dreadful: peasants picking grapes or something. Did their artist win a Stalin Prize?

A good percentage of the hotel plumbing fixtures are either broken or stopped up and there's no one to fix them. Utility men aren't exactly available in the middle of a Revolution.

The cleaning girls, too, are cleaning against the odds. There is no such thing as an electric machine (but nor was there ever!

Diary

page 23

the broom and the dust-pan are their tools of the trade.

One notices other bits of shabbiness: the runners in the hall are wearing out, sheets are of rough, cheap cotton and oft mended; the towels would be slightly over-sized cleaning cloths in any western country.

"Our" chambermaid, a small, dark woman of about 40, with a ready smile and a couple of silver teeth, continues to give us good service -- under the circumstances. She has a big job: cleaning a room which sleeps four every night and houses eight most of the day, as we smoke and sit and wander about and smoke some more. The one ashtray is supplemented by flower pots and, oftentimes, the floor.

There is more contact with the other group of correspondents during the day, and we all 15 agree that official pleas to the Russians are the only way of getting out. Of course, the others have no choice; only we have our cars parked outside.

The Russians themselves end our speculation by appearing at the hotel at 9:15 p.m. and asking whether Leiser and I will come to the Kommandatura. We get the word via Kati at the desk: "A Russian officer wants to see you." There is a glance -- it only lasts a second -- about this call in the night to Soviet HQ. The familiar tactic?

The British correspondents ask to be allowed to come, too, but the Major says no, only the Americans.

Iron gates outside the revolving door -- the curfew -- are unlocked and we follow the Major into a small blue Fededa car waiting outside. Leiser makes small talk about the cold and the late Russian working hours. The Major speaks English, although you must talk to him slowly lest he miss your meaning. Leiser's humor gets across, but just how funny this will all turn out is an open question.

Diary

page 29

We are shown into a room crowded with officers. Leiser is first and begins telling his story to a Colonel (not near-face). Leiser explains that he has his Budapest story deadline to meet and a family waiting in Vienna. The door opens somewhere in the middle of this explanation and in walks a Major General. We all get to our feet and the General takes over "the chair." What can this mean?

The General doesn't keep us waiting.

He reaches inside his heavy coat and pulls out a small notebook. The thumbing of pages, and then:

"Which one of you is Frederick L. Hiler?"

Leiser points at me and I point at me and it seems pretty unanimous. "I am, General."

I am ordered to wait and Leiser finishes his story. He is dismissed and told to return to the hotel.

The General turns to me and says that he has a report that I am being held under arrest in Győr. He, on the contrary, has investigated and has ascertained that I've been living comfortably in a hotel. Will I sign a statement to the falsity of the arrest charge?

The next hour is spent semantically. There is open and cordial discussion of the meaning of words and phrases. Will I admit that I've not been under arrest but merely detained? I bring up the American phrase "house arrest," but the General explains that no such phrase exists in Russian. "Unless," he says, "a Russian wife can get her drunken husband confined to his house by police so that he can't go out boozing again."

Eventually the three Russians (the General, the Colonel and the Major interpreter) put their heads together and draft a statement in Russian. The Major begins writing it out in English but I offer to write it myself, as time is dragging. The text is something as follows:

Diary

page 30

"We, the undersigned, agree that correspondent Frederick L. Hier, has not been held under arrest but merely detained in Győr under comfortable circumstances in a hotel and due to existing conditions in the area at the time. I, F.L. Hier, have no formal complaint to make against the Russian Military Unit. I sign this statement of my own free will and without external pressure."

My English text is then translated back into Russian again-- they are being highly correct -- and we all four sign both copies.

There is some slight discussion about RFE again, but most of it gets lost in translation. I've discovered that by talking rapidly when answering delicate questions, the issues are confused and interpreting difficult.

I leave by 11:00 p.m. The General apologizes for the nth time for the misunderstanding and inconvenience. He says we will all leave in a day or two, "as soon as the matter is cleared back through Budapest." This causes a final tug, but I feel now that we'll all get out for sure and that we haven't been compromised, really.

I am sent back to the hotel alone in the staff car, with only the driver for company. The streets are dark and deserted. I feel like offering the driver a cigarette but hold off. Unreasonable, perhaps, but is he any different than those soldiers sitting on their tanks, the occupation forces?

Back at the hotel, I find that my colleagues have been worried to death. Leiser, afraid that I was going to be arrested, had told them none of the details about our Kommandatura interlude.

My optimism isn't completely contagious, in view of past disappointments, but we prepare for bed in fairly good spirits.

And we go to bed laughing. Our two Egyptian Sphinxes are back for the third time! Shameful to laugh, I suppose, but one can't help feeling that this is one of the comedy features of the Revolution.

Diary

page 31

SUNDAY, NOV. 11:

Five of our group go to Church (last night the General lifted the ban on leaving the hotel). Someone approached them there and said the Church had heard of our detainment and was seeking ways to help us financially.

The Hungarian Church -- persecuted, all but outlawed, robbed and vilified for 12 years -- and it is going to help us! My God, what a people!

For two days the other group of correspondents has had a system of "road watches," in case a western car from Budapest should pass through Győr on the way to Vienna. This morning the first of these newsmen stuck in Budapest begin coming through. We all flag down cars and give messages to be transmitted to families and offices in Austria.

Each of the cars has a special pass from the Russians. Devastatingly frustrating to see all the rest of these people getting out and here we sit.

With, apparently, the Egyptians, forever and a day. They left again last evening but are escorted back into Győr this morning for the fourth time. And by no less than 11 tanks! Oh at least last their little putt-putt Fiat came into the city in the middle of an 11-tank convey. The two Hasser boys and their companions are really furious -- as well they might be, because this time their car as well as their pride was smashed. All the side windows were somehow broken out. We never do find out just what happened -- they won't talk to anyone by now -- but it is thought that their car may have been done in by Czech border guards. The Russians had finally wearied of their case and suggested they try as a final resort exit through Czechoslovakia. They must have run into an unfriendly force somewhere.

Their tragic-comic fate doesn't cheer us for long. By 3:30 p.m. (dusk coming on) we're sure we won't get out today. Five

Diary

page 32

of our group decides, therefore, to go for a stroll.

Perhaps their decision brought the Russians. In any case, at exactly 4:00 p.m. our English-speaking Major appears in the lobby. "Please, everyone pack immediately and come to the Kommandatura."

A mad, scurrying 20 minutes trying to get our things and our group assembled. The impatient Major gets stonier and stonier, finally announcing that he won't wait any longer. As he storms out the swinging door, the last of our members shows up from his walk.

At the Kommandatura each of us is given a paper, signed and stamped by the two military commander. As a farewell gesture, we are ordered to produce all cameras and film and the latter is confiscated. There is a brief discussion on the merits of various types of film, American, English and German, as well as black and white versus color. It was a round-table we were happy to cut short.

We are told to go out through Sopron, instead of the shorter route through Nickelendorf, but we didn't pause to debate the point. We stop for a second at the hotel to say our goodbyes, which are short, choked and tearful.

It is a silent ride, for the most part. We have to go, of course; we've waited eight long days for this moment. But it is the saddest 40 miles any of us has ever traveled.

There is hardly a light anywhere. The whole country is blacked out because of the curfew. But behind those darkened windows there is no curfew on the stoutness of heart or the brightness of spirit. Nor would there ever be. One is convinced that the Russians could stay a thousand years and still not crush these hearts or spirits. If I'm sure of few other things about this Revolution, I'm at least positive of that...

We meet a first roadblock just outside Győr, and a second before Sopron. Each of them is a tense affair, as gray soldiers examine our papers by the light of the car headlights. The Sopron soldiers spend 15 minutes grunting over our documents, and only

Diary

page 33

after we ask to see an officer are we allowed to continue.

In Sopron we are directed to its Kommandatura and have to go through still another registration, the painstaking writing down of names, addresses, birthdates and the rest of it. When is one of these officers going to get on to us and decide that we ought to stay around a while, after all? Fortunately, the Major in charge has a sense of humor and scolds us lightly: "I'm going to read your newspapers and listen to your radio tomorrow to see how you report on what has happened in Hungary."

We get a further set of passes and set out through the darkness for the border. The Hungarian border station is familiar to Jerry and me: we stood on the other side of it for some hours two weeks ago, watching scores of Hungarians, exultant if grim-faced, loading western supplies onto their trucks.

It is cold as we step out of our cars in the stillness. The only light comes from a single kerosene lamp on a desk in the customs building. The Hungarian guard doesn't say a word to us as he takes our passports and sits down to examine them.

He flips pages and looks at covers and flips more pages for 15 minutes. There are no questions. We offer him a cigarette and he takes one, puts it in his pocket and returns to flipping. Not a word. Finally:

"Hungarian visas?"

"Well, you see we didn't need visas when we came in two weeks ago..."

Silence. Flipping.

"Six visa, six gut."

The customs man gets up and leaves the room. We hear him dialing the phone from out in the hall. Sabor, our one Hungarian speaker, can hear only parts of the conversation. The guard is apparently fed up with visa-less people coming through his post. Shouldn't someone telephone Budapest?

When Gabor whispers this information to us, he nods and at the same time towards the kerosine lamp. We all understand immediately. Someone else points to a chair (the only weapon in sight) and another to a flashlight on the desk. We survey the windows to see how eight of us are going to get out two windows and one door in a matter of seconds.

It is out of the question to be stopped now, only a few feet from Austrian soil. If the Hungarians stop us, it would be the Kadar Hungarians who would be our next interrogators. The Russians would explain simply that we were no longer in their hands.

Our customs man comes back and starts writing on a dirty piece of paper with a pencil stub no longer than his little finger. From his disorganized flipping of our passports we can't figure out what he's writing down.

The scrape of his chair and out to the phone again.

In the middle of his conversation (apparently with his superiors in Sopron) he breaks off and yells to his companion outside asking him to read off the number of our car license plate. The companion ticks it off: "# 4-0-4-8-4-0."

Our number is really # 4-4800. He has mis-read it!

We will never know whether this mistake saved our necks or not, nor what it was the superiors in Sopron wanted when they asked for our numbers. It could be that instructions were to let this car go through. Or it could be that the Russians had discovered their "mistake" in letting us get away and were looking for our vehicle.

In any case, the customs man returns to his desk, picks up his stamp and pounds each of our passports once. We thank him, he grunts and we leave.

The barrier goes up — one of the loveliest manoeuvres I can remember — and in two minutes we are through the no-man's-land and on the Austrian side.

An hour later, the Vienna office.

DIARY
EPILOGUE:

All the while we were in Hungary, efforts were being made to get us released. Radio Free Europe, friends in Austria (the American Embassy found itself unable to act) and in other part of Europe and Joan were all busy bombarding Washington with telegrams and letters. The final result was an official protest from Washington, transmitted through Ambassador Bohlen in Moscow to Gromyko by private letter. We will never know whether the Russian Major General made a special trip to Győr from Budapest because of our case, or whether he just happened to be in the area and assigned the task of investigating the protest. Our supposition is that the Russians, over-sensitive in these times to western opinion, didn't want to make an issue of us -- or me, to be more specific. Thus, the statement from me that I hadn't been mistreated and had no complaints. Once the Russians had that admission, I could go.
