

The History of Szabad Nép

tr: JS

Part I: The Fight for Power
(1945-1948)

1. The political background.

The first issue of the Szabad Nép appeared in February, 1945, shortly after the liberation of Budapest from the Nazi regime and after the city was taken over by the Soviet authorities. In saying this we disregard the fact that the newspaper had ~~been~~ a period of illegal activity between 1942 and 1944. The illegal Szabad Nép, which was nothing else but a few mimeographed pamphlets which the underground Communist movement published among incredible difficulties, had no organic connection with the later legally published Szabad Nép, which was the national central daily of the Hungarian Communist Party. The Szabad Nép, as a legal daily newspaper, was a wholly new phenomenon, without experience, traditions, or antecedents. Its role was obviously quite different from the role of those very few, short-lived, and not far-reaching pamphlets which were more like manifestos than newspapers. These pamphlets were published between the two wars under the title of the paper of the Communist Party. At the same time the task of the Szabad Nép differed from the task of the Vörös Ujság (Red Newspaper) of 1919, which was the only former legal newspaper of the Communist Party and among whose contributors the only one who remained was József Révai.

The Szabad Nép came into being when the Communist Party, rising out of its illegal role and leaning on the presence of the Soviet army, had already secured a firm position in power, but the political configuration of the country was yet unformed. The government of the country was at this time not only formally but truly in the hands of a coalition and political life, although in many respects limited, was nevertheless a democratic, multi-party political activity. In this transitional order, which subsisted until about 1947, the Communist Party occupied a key position because it was the confidante of the occupying power. However, the Communist Party was not the sole possessor of power, and in these days it even refrained from making propaganda for the dictatorship of the proletariat. On the contrary, the Communist Party itself voiced its support of parliamentary democracy. These well-thought-out tactics, which surprised the old fighters of the Communist Party just as much as they surprised the Hungarian public, mortally afraid of communism, were brought back by the party leaders themselves, returning from their emigration in Moscow. The aim of this policy was to make the Hungarian public forget the unpleasant memories of the proletarian dictatorship of 1919, and to make it possible for the party to win the support of the suspicious and distrustful strata of the population. This political line required a great deal of skill and much elasticity since the Communists had to break with the slogans to which they had been accustomed (in fact

the whole teaching of Lenin had to be put aside to a certain extent), This line was particularly hard on political propaganda, and mainly on that propaganda which was conducted in public, not on that which was voiced only among closed party limits. The special attention with which the leadership of the Communist Party turned towards the Szabad Nép in these years can be explained by this fact. The composition of the editorial board of the paper reflected the same fact by being particularly strongly cadre-concentrated. The Szabad Nép had the task firstly to become the main organ of the Communist Party towards the public, and secondly to give the tone to the entire party propaganda. It had to be the exemplar to which the agitators of the party, the local papers of the party, and other party propaganda organs had to adapt themselves.

2. The editorial staff.

From the very beginning, the leadership of the Szabad Nép was almost a miniature replica of the party leadership. K Jozsef Révai became editor-in-chief, who was one of the most influential members of the party leadership which had returned from Moscow and without doubt he was the strongest member intellectually. Révai played a rather sorry role between 1949 and 1953 in Hungarian cultural life; he became cultural dictator. After 1953 his political role, his fantastic intrigues against the reform policies of Imre Nagy, were even more catastrophic. However, his role must not make us forget these extraordinary

intellectual qualities which characterized Révai. We can say without exaggeration that with the sole exception of Togliatti, the entire European Communist movement had no other intellectual leader as formidable, cultured, educated, as Révai. Révai did not belong among the undistinguished lackeys and unprincipled Machiavellists of Moscow. His judgments and his actions were dictated by a passionate conviction which went right into fanaticism; even a certain morality was not absent from the man, at least not from the private man, in cases when ideological and tactical considerations did not undermine his moral sense. His theoretical activity was directed towards assimilating Marxism in Hungary; his literary studies pursued the same end with considerable talent. It was eventually his intellectual intolerance and his ^{obvious} ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ rigidity of thought which pushed Révai into intransigent Stalinism and prevented him ^{to} ~~from~~ joining Imre Nagy after 1953 in elaborating a new political line. Révai was never stained with crimes like Rákosi, Gerő, and Mihály Farkas. (He voted against the execution of Rajk.)

Before 1949 Révai had an even greater role than later in the era of consolidated proletarian dictatorship, ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ when the real power was in the hands of three men: Rákosi, Gerő, and Farkas. But in the era of the coalition, Révai was the so-called second man of the Party, at least in political negotiations and towards the public, when he played the most

important role next to Rákosi. He was an excellent publicist and an outstanding orator, therefore in almost all the more important issues he drafted the official party position and he represented it before the public. Of course, ^{this} he had a great effect on the work of the Szabad Nép, which could get first-hand the direction it needed, and very often the paper was ~~EXISTING~~ in a position as if it would not get party policy from the party leadership but write it herself. The staff which came to the Szabad Nép under Révai remembered later something of these times and could never completely resign itself to the role of servile executive organ.

The editor in charge after Révai was Márton Horváth. He was not an everyday man either. It is not quite clear how this man, whose origin was of higher middle-class and who instinctively disliked discipline, was more of an aesthete than a politician, got into the Communist movement. Horváth was of the next generation after Révai (who lived since 1919 the life of a professional revolutionary); he came to the Communist Party in the 'thirties as a young architect, and from that time onwards he pursued a life with surprising consistency, all the requirements of which and all the elements of which were contrary to his nature. He was an illegal party fighter without physical courage; afterwards he became a journalist although he wrote with great pains; later he rose to the highest organizational post, although in the whole of Hungary there was hardly any worse organizer than Horváth.

himself. In any case, the great advantage of Horváth was that he was a very unconventional character. This advantage served him very well in his editorial post. As far as intellectual capacities were concerned, Révai was perhaps above him. On the other hand, Horváth had much more elasticity of thought, and in other respects also he had extremely good qualities of adaptation, which made it possible for him to collaborate excellently, even amicably, with the intolerant Révai. Horváth was Révai's deputy (in the party hierarchy he stood one rung below him), but he was actually the organizer and practical director of the paper. Also, it was he who stood in immediate and constant contact with the editorial staff; and ~~it~~ ^{here} it must be said ~~that~~ that Horváth did not demand the slightest authority for himself; he took it for granted that from Révai down to the latest apprentice everyone called him by his nickname, Manci, and at the paper's staff meetings many jokes, though not offensive ones, were cracked at his expense. All this had its effect on the general spirit of the editorial staff, which was characterized by a great deal of informality and a very small degree of respect for authority.

Révai was a member of the Party Politburo and later a member of the even smaller leading body, the Party Secretariat. Horváth was deputy member of the Politburo until 1951, then, beginning from there until 1953, he was ~~full~~ full member of the Politburo. The third party leader on the editorial staff was Géza Lesensky, who was also an important representative of the Hungarian

Communist intelligentsia. Losonczy belonged to the Communists of the pre-war "March Front, which was a group of Communist intellectuals, standing, in its origins and in its point of view, closest to the populist movement.

~~Losonczy was~~ (This group was imprisoned at the end of 1950, together with Losonczy.) At the paper, Losonczy worked as a deputy for Márton Horváth, but his activities were mostly limited to the writing of editorials. In those days Losonczy was one of the young hopes of the party -- already in 1945 he was elected a deputy member of the Central leadership. This was mainly due to the personal liking Révai had for him; Losonczy knew Révai already before the war (in Paris) and they were friends. Losonczy was a thoroughgoing intellectual Communist and because of this he was perhaps more averse than anybody else to party bureaucracy and to the usual manifestations of party life. ^{In these days} He had very good personal contacts with personalities of the political life ~~in~~ ~~the~~ who belonged to other parties and he was also on good terms with representatives of the cultural life in general. If later, that is to say in the Ministry of Education where Révai took him with himself, Losonczy also became a ~~rigorous~~ rigorous exponent of the party line, this happened rather under the pressure of his surroundings and of the Marxist doctrine than under the influence of his real personality. In 1956, at the press debate of the Petőfi Circle, Losonczy publicly apologized and asked the forgiveness of all of those against whom he

had committed some injustice when he was a Secretary of State. His role during the revolution and his tragic martyrdom no doubt atoned for all his possible sins, and represented the fateful close of a life which had started with a sincere wish to serve the people.

The editorial staff of the Szabad Nép reflected partly the actual constellation of personalities in the post-war years and partly the taste of Révai and Horváth. The staff of the years of the beginning could be divided into three rather different groups. Into the first group belonged the former illegal Communists and among them the more notable ones, such as György Markos, György Szekeres, Gyula Kállai, and others, without whom the Szabad Nép could not have possibly been started, but who soon left the paper and went into higher (diplomatic, administrative, headquarter, ~~parliamentary~~ parliamentary, etc.,) positions; it is worth while to remark that the representatives of this group, whether they ~~were~~ ^{had been} Communists abroad or in Hungary, got imprisoned between 1949 and 1951 almost without exception. (The group about which we are talking now is the intellectual stratum of the pre-war or wartime Communist movement.)

Into the second group I could put the journalists with a bourgeois past (György Komos, Emil Szegedi, Béla Bedó, etc.). Révai and Horváth employed them without the slightest scruple and did not ask much whether their ideology was truly Communist, because they knew that in order to make a newspaper, you had

and who came to communism under the effect of their experiences during the war and under fascism (the exception was Vásárhelyi, he was a pre-war Communist; he actually was the spiritual center of this group). Horváth, when he was looking for staff members and collaborators, did not look very much at the origin of the men. He was first and foremost interested in talent and in tangible results. This is the explanation for the fact that in the editorial offices of the Szabad Nép a concentration of intellectuals occurred the like of which, at least permanently, was never formed at any other party organ in Hungary. The origin of frequent friction between the party headquarters, which had an entirely different social composition, and the Szabad Nép was partly to be found in this fact. The professional party functionaries could never free themselves from the impression that the journalists of the Szabad Nép were looking down upon them. When I look back on these times, I must admit that their suspicion was not quite without foundation.

3. Organization, morale, and working methods.

During these years a relatively free spirit reigned in the editorial offices. Of course this spirit was Communist, but it was not yet the ossified conformist spirit which became more and more reminiscent of the atmosphere of inquisition and which took over after 1949. The editorial staff resembled in these early days rather to a detachment of franc-tireurs than the

regular army. This was also connected with Révai's personality. Révai was a fanatic and a ruthless character, however, he was not nearly as petty-minded as to set up ~~EXACT~~ rigid rules for everything, and also he was a man who, though he wanted to stemroll divergent opinions, nevertheless tolerated and even liked to hear them. In these days Horváth was still less of a conformist, he was still mistrustful of official party slogans, and knew that with such slogans no really competitive newspaper can be published. He was also rather cool towards the sounding of clichés, ~~and~~ he preferred to employ people capable of independent thought, and paid little regard to the so-called cadre-requirements which placed proletarian descent above ~~ESSENTIAL~~ talent. Losonczy, Várnagy and Gimes (Horváth relied mostly on the three of them) were also cultured and rather liberal-minded people, who did not regard the world at all through the blinkers of party bureaucrats. These factors of personality were largely responsible for the fact that the spirit of the Szabad Nép was right at the beginning rather different from the intellectual and political configuration of other party organs. But of course another factor was the nature of journalistic work itself, which gave people ⁱⁿ an insight into what was happening ~~BEHIND~~ the wings and did not fit very well into the frame of primitive belief and discipline which was otherwise required by the Communist Party.

The Szabad Nép was, of course, a party newspaper, following

strictly the party line and not giving voice to any kind of individual viewpoint or opinion (excepting the field of cultural activities where the critics had quite a considerable leeway). But in those days the Szabad Nép was a well-edited newspaper, following the traditions of Hungarian newspaper-writing, which had interesting reports, ample editorial material, which could effectively argue with the various political opponents. Such ~~merits~~ merits, of course, were the consequences of a situation in which neither the Communist Party nor the Szabad Nép did as yet enjoy a monopolistic position. To carry out such a work the paper enjoyed a relatively broad autonomy: there was no direct supervision by any leading administrative organ of the party, but Révai formed the connecting link between the party and the paper and he set almost with full authority the Szabad Nép's line in given situations and actual questions. Within the paper itself, there was also a large measure of personal responsibility and little supervision imposed during the actual work.

Working methods were the following: every morning the whole editorial staff congregated in Horváth's room. This staff consisted at the time of about 30-40 people. The political line to be followed was either given from the situation of the days before, or Révai or Horváth said a few words about it. After this Horváth asked everyone personally what he could

at the Szabad Hép always signified some kind of change in the political life and following the changes of themes in the paper, the political history of post-war Hungary can largely be reconstructed, at least as it appeared from the Communist Party's point of view. In 1945 the tone was given by the anti-German and anti-Nazi or nyilas propaganda and by the propagation of the land-reform, together with the call for "national unity," which reached right to the bourgeois parties. By the beginning of 1946 this tone was largely replaced by a more demagogic line which stressed the class struggle. This line was characterized by fight against speculation, by attempts to pit the poor peasantry against the better situated groups in the villages, attempts to whip up popular feeling against the bourgeois classes in general ("let the rich pay"), and, finally, an ever-increasing campaign of political denunciation against the right wing of the Smallholders' Party, which was suspected with conspiracy against democracy. This last agitation reached its climax in 1947 and culminated in the first great political trials. After the Soviet abduction of Bela Kovacs and the abdication of Ferenc Nagy, the Smallholders' Party disintegrated and ceased to be a political opponent. The campaigns of the Szabad Hép now concentrated on the so-called "unmasking" of the Social Democratic right wing and ^{on} the propagation of the fusion of the two working-class parties. But before this the paper announced the three-year Reconstruction

Plan and in the name of this plan demanded the nationalization of industry. The nationalization campaign and the anti-Social Democratic campaign were conducted together until the middle of 1948, at which time the fusion between the two parties took place and the nationalizations were also to a large extent carried through. From this time onward the main enemy and the main topic of the paper became the clerical reaction, in other words, the Church, which the Communist Party wanted to eliminate from education. This campaign culminated in the trial of the Primate Cardinal Mindszenty, and with this trial the first phase of the Hungarian people's democracy more or less came to an end. But the look of the Szabad Nép has also undergone considerable changes; until this time the choice of themes in the paper was dictated by politics, but now economic questions become gradually more important. On the other hand, a new column makes its appearance: this deals with party life and signifies that whatever political activity was ~~still~~ still left in Hungary, it was being conducted entirely within the exclusive frame of the Communist Party.

The editorial staff of the Szabad Nép could be considered as more or less unchanging in the years of 1945-48. The purges within the party were as yet to come. In the summer of 1948 the fusion of the Social Democratic and Communist parties should have brought with itself a transformation of the party machinery, so as to reflect the union of the two workers' parties. How little this was actually done is shown for instance by

the fact that only one Social Democratic editor was taken into the editorial staff of the Szabad Nép (his name was István Száva), but even his role was of an entirely technical nature. This former editor of the Méreggye, a journalist of good standing, was given only a secondary position as assistant editor at the Szabad Nép, and even this position he held only temporarily. Soon he was transferred as an official into the Association of Journalists, and soon after the arrest of Árpád Szakasits he was also imprisoned.

Part II: On the Way of Bolshevization
(1949 - 1953)

1. The "year of change."

1948 was no doubt a turning point in the history of post-war independent Hungary. One could say that with 1948 the ~~independent~~ history of Hungary ~~has ceased to exist~~ for the next few years. What began in 1948 was rather the common history of the Soviet zone of influence, with certain local variations, which however did not affect its essence. This dark period of Eastern Europe was initiated by the 1948 Cominform meeting, which passed the resolution to ~~to~~ excommunicate Yugoslavia. With this resolution the Soviet standardization of Eastern Europe began.

The Cominform resolution was actually the logical consequence of a ready-made situation. In 1945 and during the following years

the Communist parties in all the later "people's democracies" were engaged in active struggle for power. Their means necessarily had to be different in different countries. But after the Communist monopoly of power was solidly established, the situation changed. With this the local parties, which represented mere departments of the Soviet main office, achieved complete power and the road was open to the uniformizing efforts of the Soviets. By 1948 in every country of the Eastern bloc the Communist Party was firmly in the saddle. Stalin's cunningly planned democratic game which he conducted between 1945 and 1947 to reassure the Western world has come to an end. After Stalin, Bierut, Dimitrov, and also Rákosi could openly declare that a people's democracy (the Marxist definition of which gave so much headache to party ideologists in the previous years) was nothing else but the dictatorship of the proletariat. József Révai, who set up an independent theory after 1945 on the difference between ~~the~~ a people's democracy and the dictatorship of the proletariat, both representing different ways to socialism, had to undergo public self-criticism in 1948 for saying that a people's democracy was ^{the} a joint rule of the working class and the peasantry and not the single domination of the proletariat (see the first educational conference of the Hungarian Workers' Party). Stormclouds began to gather over the head of György Lukács, who gave an even broader interpretation to the concept of "people's democracy." As regards the "allied parties" from before 1948 (the "purged" Smallholders' Party and

the National Peasant Party), they could still live for a while some kind of vegetative existence, but in the spring of 1948, with the formation of the "Patriotic Front" (whose secretary general was László Rajk), only their name remained.

Before the complete sovietization, however, the people's democracies had to undergo one more purgatory. This, ~~however~~, touched already the respective Communist parties. These parties (coming freshly out of the democratic game of post-war years) were not unified sufficiently and not reliable enough for Stalin's plans. That Communist disobedience was in itself possible was shown by the Yugoslav example. The Cominform resolution which excommunicated Yugoslavia was therefore first of all aimed at the domestic situation within the Soviet bloc. The purpose of the resolution was to discipline both ideologically and politically the Communist parties within the bloc, ~~and~~ to make any further contradiction impossible, and ^{to} the question of ^{beyond} Soviet leadership ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ ~~the~~ discussion. To make ^{the} intimidation and the breaking-in complete, the vituperations against Yugoslavia were soon followed by the deeds of the Rajk-trial. The darkest night of Stalinism was covering Hungary and the whole of Eastern Europe.

Needless to say, this change had its implications for the press as well. Not only in the form of purges (which we are going to discuss presently). The purges were only logical consequences and consolidating means for the change of spirit that took place. May we remind our readers that in the previous

phase Communist propaganda had to show a nationalist ~~side~~^{aspect} and also -- because of competition -- it had to be inventive, which ingenuity was often ~~used~~^{exercised} to the detriment of party doctrine. The year 1949 put an end to this phase. At the beginning of this year, Rákosi gave a personal audience to the journalists of the Hungarian press and explained to them that the newspapers of a proletarian dictatorship could not be so motley in appearance as the bourgeois papers. They should follow, Rákosi said, the Soviet example and should transform their papers to the likeness of the Soviet papers. This warning, of course, was not first of all directed against the Szabad Nép (which anyhow was in party hands) but against the other papers, which were then undergoing "Gleichschaltung" (Magyar Hírlap, etc.) The new rules, ~~which~~ which applied to the other newspapers, applied of course twice as much to the Szabad Nép. The new motto of the day, "Let us follow the example of the Pravda," put an end to the traditions of the Hungarian press at the Szabad Nép with ~~it~~ one stroke. The motto meant to eradicate everything from the paper that was individual, interesting, had life in it, and, instead, everything had to exude the grey, tiresome, unindividual and non-thinking, unctuous and final interpretation of the official standpoint.

2. Imre Ferenc.

In 1949 Révai left the Szabad Nép. The reason, formally at least, was that he became Minister of Education, and as such

(also as the leader of the agitation and propaganda committee of the Communist Party) he took over the direction of the entire cultural life of the country. There was, however, something else behind it, too. Révai's authority suffered a certain eclipse within the party in connection with the Rajk trial. Though Rákosi himself was very fond of Révai and without him felt rather helpless, the clever intrigues of Mihály Farkas, who was aiming at the leadership, managed to put the name of László Gács, ~~SEE~~
~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ trade union leader and Révai's brother-in-law, on the list of the suspects in the Rajk-trial, casting, thereby, ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ a certain shadow on Révai himself. Many of those sentenced during the Rajk trial, when they came out of prison in 1954, '55, and '56, told us that the henchmen of Gábor Péter asked questions about Révai from many of them and called Révai between themselves a dirty Trotskyist. They were convinced, in the prison, that a trial of Révai ^{would} follow the trial of Rajk. Later, probably due to Rákosi's intervention, Révai's standing in the party was completely restored. The fact is that in 1953 Révai was one of the four leaders whom the Praesidium of the Soviet Communist Party branded as responsible for the mistaken Hungarian policies of the previous years. (Rákosi, Gerő, Farkas, Révai.)

In any case, after 1949 Révai did not take a hand in the making of the Szabad Hép and the direction of the paper was

taken over completely by Márton Horváth. As a matter of fact, even Horváth directed the paper only from the topmost level, because he was appointed to party headquarters as the leader of one of the main departments (agitation and propaganda department, which was not the same as the committee of similar name previously mentioned) of the party machinery, ~~RESTRUCTURED~~^{now} completely remodeled on Soviet lines.

The real editor of the paper from 1950 onward was Oszkár Betlen, a man of no outstanding erudition, of slavish character, and a ruthless, intolerant, diehard Stalinist. Betlen was an old "professional revolutionary," who spent his youth in the Communist movement of Slovakia. From this time dates his good relationship with Mihály Farkas. Betlen spent seven years in Auschwitz and came back from there with a persecution mania and sadist inclinations. After a few months of stay in Moscow, he re-emigrated in 1945 to Hungary instead of Czechoslovakia, and, at the recommendation of Mihály Farkas, he was given a position with the Szabad Nép. In the beginning NKK he wrote reports and filled an assistant editorial post. He was on good terms with Horváth, but the group of Lengyel and Vásárhelyi did not take very much to this Muscovite whose assignment was of a suspicious nature. Already from 1947, Betlen conducted an assiduous intrigue against this group. With excellent tactical sense, he

the principle prevailed even here that the so-called "social composition" had to be improved by working-class cadres. In this way a mass of unproductive people filled the editorial offices. A large part of them was soon sifted out; many, however, remained there in spite of their lack of talent, and those of the old staff who did the work were requested to make journalists out of them. -- There were, though, a few lucky exceptions. In the spring of 1953, the editorial committee was enlarged with the inclusion of two talented journalists, one of them the economist Sándor Novobátsky (who, after the revolution, spent one year in prison) and Sándor Fekete, former Népszava-leader, both of whom joined the paper a short time previously.

3. In the footsteps of the Pravda.

Beginning from 1950 onwards, the Szabad Nép had about 100 political journalists on its staff and at times even more. The majority of these people did, of course, little work; the main burden weighed on 15-20 journalists. During this time the editorial office was no longer independent. All the more important articles had to be okayed before printing by various party forums and by various departments of the Central Leadership. The paper gave less and less information to its readers and became a daily propaganda pamphlet with verbose and dull articles which were hardly read by anyone. The circulation, however, bounded to new heights and at the beginning of 1952 it came close to 800,000 (later it fell to 700,000). For this mostly the

forceful subscription campaigns were responsible. A strong moral pressure was exerted on factory workers and office workers to make them subscribe to the Szabad Nép and the subscriptions had to be entered at their place of work, so that later they should not be able to stop the subscription in secret. All official organs, institutions, and a large part of party activists subscribed to the paper in order to be fully informed about the current party line.

The atmosphere within the editorial offices was at this time very oppressive. For the smallest jocular or anti-authoritarian remark party punishment was meted out to people, and small mistakes (even the oversight of printing errors) were followed by heavy fines. Fanatical unanimity was required from everybody and an atmosphere of military discipline was being aimed at. Working hours lasted from early morning until late at night and whoever dared to complain about the too heavy burden of work was not only branded for ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ "unwillingness to make sacrifices," but was even debarred from journalistic work. Betlen was always making investigations after everybody's origins and friends, and he was particularly happy if he could "unmask" someone for such reasons and remove him from the paper. At the same time no one was released from his post at his own request: those who wanted to leave the paper were accused of desertion and were threatened, whatever reason they might have given for their desire to leave.

The journalistic work was itself dictated by the ever-recurring slogan that the Szabad Nép should be like the Pravda. By 1952 this aim had been achieved: the once lively newspaper that used to have an independent appearance became just as grey, dull, unctious and poster-like as its great model, the Moscow Pravda. The first page was usually filled up with news of work competitions (though every journalist knew that no one was interested in them, but went on fabricating them out of duty), or with greetings telegrams to Rákosi, on the second and third page verbose and flat official articles figured, and on the last page (just as in the Pravda), international news. In order to make the resemblance complete, printing machines were brought from Germany which could print a larger format and the Szabad Nép, breaking with the Hungarian tradition of small-format newspapers, was produced on the large Pravda format.

In domestic politics, the Szabad Nép had to print variations on the momentary decisions of the party. In foreign politics the line was indicated by Soviet diplomacy. We were of course not allowed to represent any viewpoint which departed from Soviet notes and statements, but beyond this we were directed to accompany the slightest Soviet announcement with enthusiastic affirmative comments. We had to approve of everything the Soviet did ex officio, and not even the thought of a different opinion was allowed to come up. In fact, if on the occasion of some "event,"

the obligatory flood of compliments or anti-imperialist
was omitted,
thunderings, one of the party leaders, mostly Rákosi himself,
gave us an angry telephone call. I remember several cases when
Rákosi honored us with his personal visit and, in his usual
jocular manner which, however, brooked no contradiction, explained
to us that a small country like Hungary could never have any
independent foreign policy, nor should she ~~SS~~ have one; our
privilege was to keep in step with the foreign policy of the
"great Soviet Union" (Rákosi never omitted, even in private
conversations, to put the adjective "great" before the name of the
Soviet Union or of Stalin).

The editorial committee, at this time, was instructed to
conduct a violent propaganda campaign of vituperation. It was
not enough merely to reprint articles from the Cominform-paper;
"independent material" had to be fabricated, although very little
real basis could be found. Our main "suppliers of material" were
Yugoslav emigrés living in Hungary and in the neighboring countries,
who published several papers, as they were told by the police,
and given money from the Cominform parties to do so. In Budapest
their paper was called Za Ljudske Zmago. As private persons
we did not have much sympathy with the Yugoslavs, thinking that
they were rather dubious characters and as to their material,
we suspected it to be figments of their imagination. Yet we
beautifully published their "reports" and suppressed our doubts
as to the reliability of their information. The party leadership,

however, was not satisfied and constantly demanded more and more anti-Yugoslav propaganda. In the end the editorial committee put in a journalist whose exclusive duty was to manufacture anti-Tito material.

In the beginning of 1953, shortly before Stalin's death, all anti-Yugoslav propaganda was unexpectedly stopped. The first reason they gave ~~us~~ about this measure was that the material was largely supplied by Gábor Péter, who was arrested around that time, and therefore certain revisions seemed necessary. After this Stalin died and ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ no room was left for anything else in the paper. Around April we got a new directive that we should attack Yugoslavia with a "damper" and should use less pointed expressions.

Part III: The Thaw
(1953 - 1956)

1. The June Turning Point.

A new and interesting era began in the history of the Szabad Nép during the summer of 1953. One day, at the end of June, the leading journalists of the paper were called together and were told about the ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ resolution passed by the Central Committee of the Party the day before. The Central Committee surveyed the policy of the previous years and condemned it as fundamentally mistaken. The resolution, which, by the way, was inspired by the Presidium of the Soviet Communist Party, contained

the basic outlines of the government program which Imre Nagy put before the country a week later.

This change ~~NA~~ made an extraordinary impression on the members of the staff. True that some of us began to feel already in the previous months that, since the death of Stalin, some hitherto unknown change was about to happen in the Communist world movement. Such a change was indicated by the release of the imprisoned Soviet doctors and by the mention of the requirements of the so-called Socialist legality, by a great number of amnesties, the change in the tone of Soviet diplomacy, the sudden damping of the Stalin-cult which happened almost on the day of the funeral, and the "new course" which had been introduced in East Germany immediately before the Hungarian turning point in June. The East German "new course" was, remarkably enough, connected with the insurrection of the Berlin workers. The June resolution, which branded the rule of Rákosi and his friends as the rule of a faction and published a whole list of crimes, affected us like an explosion. It especially affected those who were not yet deprived by Stalinism of their capacity to think.

In spite of all the purges that the Rákosi regime conducted in the editorial offices of the Szabad Nép, there were still a great number of people who could think, especially among those professional journalists who had their share of bourgeois education and whom even Betlen was reluctant to remove to the

last man because he was afraid that in their absence the work would not go on. In this more liberal-minded group a fermentation began during the summer of 1953 and lasted uninterruptedly and more and more noticeably until the fall of 1954, when the memorable revolt of the Szabad Nép took place. On this occasion the irate party leadership replaced the entire old guard of the editorial staff. From this group at the Szabad Nép came those anti-Stalinist and democratic Socialist journalists whose front played such a great role in the spiritual preparation of the 1956 October revolution and who, together with the writers, completely annihilated ideologically the forces of Rakosian within the Hungarian working-class movement.

Beginning from the summer of 1953, the hitherto at least visibly unified editorial office split into two sharply opposed camps. One of them openly followed the new policies of Imre Nagy, but the other camp joined the silent yet all the more tenacious sabotage of the June resolutions, ^{which was being} directed by Rákosi. The first camp rallied around Miklós Gimes, who has been since condemned to death and executed by Kádár and his clique in the Imre Nagy-trial. More prominent members of this camp were Pál Lécsei (who has now been condemned to 8 years), János Kornai (who later left journalism and as an economist wrote in 1956 the most significant analytical work on the bureaucratic centralism of Communist planned economy; the book appeared immediately after

the revolution), Gábor Lénárt (who fled abroad after the revolution and settled in Germany), Sándor Novobátsky (who was imprisoned for one year after the revolution), Sándor Fekete, and Péter Kende (now living in Paris). This group was joined by Tibor Méray when he came home from Korea where he had been a war correspondent and who now lives also in Paris. This opposition group at the Szabad Nép (which group included a large part of the leading journalists) was for a long time the only conscious and determined supporter of Imre Nagy within the party machinery, which otherwise regarded him with distrust and partly consciously, partly unconsciously sabotaged his new policies.

The Rákosi-camp of the editorial office was, of course, led by Betlen. His deputy, Imre Komor, who came to the Szabad Nép around 1953 (having been previously editor in charge of the Méneszava), was an old Muscovite and completely at one with Betlen politically, though personally the two men lived a cat-and-dog life. Komor fancied himself a much greater man than Betlen and had his eye on the position of editor-in-chief; he reviled Betlen everywhere -- Betlen knew this and paid him back amply in counter-intrigues. The rivalry of these two made the work of the opposition easier, especially because Komor, being a superficial and egocentric person, did not notice that beyond his own little personal fight, there was also a fight of principles going on in the editorial office. In this political battle

Betlen became more and more isolated, so that his position with the paper finally became untenable. ^{His} ~~THE~~ situation was further aggravated by his own personal faults of character, and, in the summer of 1954, immediately after the Third Party Congress, the Politburo of the Party ordered his removal and entrusted the chairmanship of the editorial committee to Márton Horváth. Betlen left ingloriously; from the hurriedly ~~EM~~ called meeting of all the editorial staff where his replacement was announced, he left the paper's building like a stray dog, surrounded by cold silence. The editorial staff was at that time already completely under the influence of the opposition.

2. The 1954 October Revolt.

With the appointment of Horváth, a new editorial committee was formed whose members were Kenor, Lajos Fehér (at this time an enthusiastic follower of Imre Nagy, but in November 1956 he became a traitor and went over to Kádár), Novobátsky, Sándor Felste, and Tibor Méray. Gimes was left out, as if to counter-balance the relieving of Betlen, and he was sent to Paris as a correspondent. In December, when Miklós Vásárhelyi, as assistant press chief of Imre Nagy, reorganized the Magyar Hírlap to make it into the organ of Imre Nagy's idea of a popular front, Gimes went over to the Magyar Hírlap and took an editorial post there. Even so the partisans of the new policy were still in absolute majority on the editorial committee of the Szabad Nép. Horváth

himself, in spite of his usual cautious tactics, was emotionally attracted to them. During these months the Szabad Nép underwent a complete transformation, both externally and internally. Instead of being the replica of the Fronda, it started to become a newspaper again and, following the spirit of the new policies, struck a very critical note. The line of the Szabad Nép came to diverge more and more from the official party line, which was being pulled backwards by Rákosi, Gerő, and Farkas, and also, from the background, by Révai (who hated Imre Nagy) with all the strength they could muster. The showdown was imminent.

In the country the situation became more and more tense. The oscillating policies which were the result of the tug-of-war going on inside the party and in the course of which the promises made by the June government program were not being fulfilled, infuriated the public opinion all the more so because there were official statements of "resistance against the new political line" which had to be mastered. Except that no one ever told it plainly where and in what persons should one look for this tenacious and always victorious "resistance." The opposition group of the Szabad Nép did not ^{have} any direct contact with Imre Nagy, but knew very well the situation within the party and knew exactly that the resistance came from the party leadership itself, where Imre Nagy fought for the new policies from an isolated position and could only produce results whenever he managed to put the

decision up to a larger forum. The Rákosi-clique selected the members of the Politburo from yesmen who reacted favorably to the slightest movements of Rákosi's eyebrow; if, however, the discussion was taking place before a larger audience (even if only in the full session of the Central Committee), then Rákosi and his friends had no courage to come out openly in their true colors and pretended that they themselves had accepted Imre Nagy's point of view.

The situation was therefore getting ready for an internal explosion which, in fact, occurred in October 1954, at a meeting of the Central Committee, where Imre Nagy's direct appeal and the outraged criticism of the more intelligent Central Committee members swept away the resolution submitted by the Politburo (which happened for the first time in ten years in the history of the Hungarian Communist Party) and adopted a new resolution, which formulated anew the June program and gave out the slogan that the "resistance" must be smashed.

The opposition group at the Szabad Nép decided that the time was ripe for action. The few months which had elapsed since Horváth reoccupied the editorial chair meant great liberation from the terror atmosphere of Betlen and gave an opportunity to a somewhat more serious ideological and political organizing. The party organization of the Szabad Nép editorial staff to which Peter Kende was appointed new secretary became an important stronghold of the new policies and prepared itself for ~~aggressive~~

coming out into the open. When the news of the rebellious session of the Central Committee arrived (this news was, of course, strongly confidential), we called a membership meeting at the Székesi Ház to launch a concentrated attack against the representatives of the reaction within the party, especially against Gerő and Parkas. For tactical reasons, we did not want to mix in the person of Rákosi. The idea was that the representatives of other party organs should also be invited to our membership meeting (which, of course, officially had to be of a restricted character) in order to persuade them to take similar action. Also, through personal approaches we decided to try and persuade a number of party organizations to make a similar move and we wanted to send stencilled copies of the minutes of our meeting to every member of the Central Committee and to some other party members in more important positions, because we hoped to encourage them to further action. Today our ideas might appear ridiculous or, at least, puerile. But in those days any opposition move had to be conducted among such limitations.

Our membership meeting proved a success beyond our expectations. Méray, Lőcséi, Kende, Kurnai, Lénárt and Novobátsky were the keynote speakers, but even the others, excepting Kemorn who was openly laughed at, spoke in a similar way, so much so that even Márton Horváth was compelled to "appreciate" the fighting spirit of the membership meeting. This he had to do in spite of the

not at all flattering criticisms which were directed against his editorial work. He was accused face to face with no less than dishonorable cowardice. The membership meeting lasted for three days, ~~only~~ with such interruptions^{only} as were necessary to produce the day's paper in a hurry. Our speeches revealed that the chief representatives of resistance to the new policies sit in^{the chairs of} the highest party leadership, they branded the agrarian policies of Gerő, the terror organization which Mihály Farkas had built up within the party, and demanded an account of the case of the innocently imprisoned victims (among them was János Kádár, still in prison at that time), and demanded an explanation for all these illegal actions. The speakers demanded the uncompromising fulfillment of the June program and the right of free criticism within the party and, above all, freedom for the press to tell the truth: ~~to put~~ ^{at last,} and end to compulsory lying.

The action of the Szabad Nép had a frenetic effect. Very soon all Budapest knew about it -- at first through the local grapevine and later from the official information passed out by the higher party organs which reviled the journalists of the Szabad Nép and especially this particular membership meeting. The Politburo fumed with rage and immediately forbade the circulation of the meeting's minutes, but it could not prevent the occurrence of similar manifestations in a great number of party organizations, especially in the fields of the press, and of ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ cultural activities. The party secretaries of these organizations were then called together and they were told

in threatening speeches to change their position. The party leaders knew what was in the wind and wanted to prevent the infection from spreading further. Some leaders (Farkas, Lajos Ács) said that there was already too much of democracy within the party and that this was the cause of trouble. The membership meeting of the Szabad Nép party organization was to them the "inaugurating rally of the inter-party opposition" and, as they said, such attempts must be nipped in the bud. The pressure was so great that Imre Nagy himself did not dare to support the rebels of the Szabad Nép openly, although they were fighting for his cause. This caution, however, availed little. The campaign which had been started against the "rebels" of the Szabad Nép led to another campaign against "right-wing deviationists," which, in the end, brought about the fall of Imre Nagy.

The "ideological struggle" against the ominous membership meeting of the Szabad Nép party organization went on for five-six weeks. After this the Politburo (the meetings of which were at that time boycotted by Imre Nagy) decided that enough words have been said and the time was ripe for the so-called organizational action. In mid-December Kende was removed from the Szabad Nép (because as party secretary he was regarded mainly responsible for the events). Némay was also relieved from his post on the editorial committee and two other journalists were also dismissed from the paper (they too, ^{had} delivered sharp speeches at the membership meeting and had thus invited disciplinary action). After

the 1955 March resolution which put an end to the "new course" in Hungary and removed Imre Nagy from the leadership of the country, the purge continued at the Szabad Nép. The following were dismissed: Méray, Nevebátsky, Lajos Fehér, Kernal, Imre Patkó, Gábor Lénárt, Teréz Laky, György Láng, and a new editorial committee was appointed. Sándor Fekete was demoted and became a mere contributor. With this purge the old guard was virtually completely eliminated from the editorial office. To achieve the "political strengthening" of the Szabad Nép, two men were put into the editorial committee (Tivadar Matusek and János Kukuska) who had never had anything to do with journalism, but were so-called trained party functionaries and Rákosi's faithful toadies. Next to them Kálmán Takács, György Messár and György Császár composed the new editorial committee. This committee stayed on until the paper ceased publication. In the meantime Komar also left the Szabad Nép and went over to the Magyar Hírszemle in April 1955; on the other hand, Botlen came back to the Szabad Nép together with his family, after having spent some time in Bucharest, as the Hungarian representative of the Cominform paper.

3. The last days.

The embers, however, still glowed under the ashes. The majority of the SEKESZKAI staff at the Szabad Nép did not forget and never denied October 1954. After coming back to the paper, Oszkár Botlen continued his previous bloodhound activities in

complete isolation and therefore with a much smaller degree of success. When after the fall of Rákosi, in the late summer of 1956, the rehabilitation of dismissed journalists began, the editorial staff of the Szabad Nép expected the return of the "old guard" with tremendous excitement.

This expectation was never fulfilled. Though Gerő and his clique decided after agonizing hesitations to restore the 1954 October 1954 editorial committee of the Szabad Nép and even ~~planned~~ to include Miklós Gimes in it, they delayed the realization of this plan until the October events put an end to all their plans.

The following is the dramatic story of the last days of the Szabad Nép: in the morning of October 23, the day when the revolution broke out, an internal revolution also erupted at the Szabad Nép. Betlen, terrified of the passions enflamed against him, resigned his post and, for the second time, ignominiously left the building. At a stormy meeting of the editorial office, a four-member delegation was chosen, whose task was to go immediately to party headquarters and describe to Gerő and his associates the revolutionary mood of the people, demanding at the same time the urgent realization of certain reforms. The leader of this delegation was Márton Horváth, and they managed to find their way into the party headquarters, where Gerő, Révai, Kádár and Maresán negotiated with them. The negotiations were conducted in a very excited tone. The journalists said that the

ban on public meetings announced in the course of the morning was a blunder and asked Gerő and his friends whether they wanted to fire on possible demonstrators. "Yes, we will fire, ~~we~~ ~~will~~ and I want you to know that we will defend the dictatorship of the proletariat at all costs" -- shouted Révai, almost beside himself, the same Révai who, a few hours later, fled trembling from the ^{besieged} Szabad Nép building, when he found out that there was nobody whom he could order to fire. The chief speaker of the Szabad Nép delegation was Pál Lőcssei, who ~~had just come back~~ ^{had just come back} ~~from the paper~~ to the paper after two years of study elsewhere. In vain did Lőcssei warn Gerő and his clique that the dissatisfaction of the people would eventually lead to an explosion if they did not follow the Polish example as soon as possible. Marosán wanted to eject him forcibly from the building.

By the evening the ~~ground~~ ^{ground} floor of the Szabad Nép building was burning. In the afternoon there was still work going on above, in the editorial offices; the party leadership sent Révai and István Friss to the paper in order to supervise the entire issue in view of the extraordinary situation. In the evening a crowd of demonstrators appeared in front of the building, shouting "Down with the Szabad Nép." Some of the journalists in the building hurriedly composed an extra issue of the paper, in which they announced that they themselves felt solidarity with the demonstrators, the revolution, and condemned the part of the Szabad Nép, which was given to lying. This extra number was

thrown in large batches into the crowd, but, instead of reading it, the people burned the bundles as they came down. In one of the higher windows a loudspeaker was set up, but, of course, they did not succeed in calming the crowds with words. In the meantime the guard of the building fled and around midnight even the most eloquent agitators were unable to stem the attack of the demonstrators against the building. The crowd burst in and on the lower floors scattered and smashed everything. On the square before the building, two cars were turned over and burned. The third floor, where the paper was actually produced, was left, ironically enough, completely untouched (the lower floors were taken up by other editorial offices and by the publication department). Certain groups of demonstrators, however, came right up to the third floor and the members of the staff escaped through the printing office and the back entrance. The printers stayed, and so did two journalists, both of whom belonged to the immediate entourage of Imre Nagy and whose tragic fate we have already mentioned. They were Miklós Gimes and Pál Lécsei. This small group, consisting of the two journalists and a few printers, stayed in the printing office for 48 hours without interruption. The demonstrators, who ranged freely in the abandoned building, realized that the valuable printing machines could be well employed for the purposes of the revolution, and therefore they left the printing office intact. Later the

revolutionary papers were printed on the same machines.

On Wednesday morning, October 24, not a single newspaper appeared in Budapest. The Szabad Nép was not even prepared, other papers (such as the Magyar Nemzet, for instance) were ready, but could not be distributed because of the street fights. No paper appeared on Thursday morning either. The last copies of the Szabad Nép came out on Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and Monday. These issues were edited every day by a different journalist from among those bolder men who dared to go out during these stormy days and to go into the Szabad Nép building. These last issues of the paper contained mainly bare news, the announcements of the moribund party, and proclamations and orders of Imre Nagy's government, which was formed in the dawn hours of October 24. According to the personal opinions of the respective journalists (who in these days received directives from no one), the articles of the paper recognized the just cause of the insurrection and did not speak about "counter-revolution." The last issue of the Szabad Nép, which came out on Monday, October 29, ~~SEIKEN~~ attacked the gross falsifications of the Pravda concerning the Hungarian revolution. The author of this article was Miklós Molnár.

On Monday afternoon, new groups of demonstrators entered the Szabad Nép headquarters, and the editorial staff, led by Márton Horváth, left the building for good. The same night a few members of the old guard: Gimes, Löcsei, Kende, Lénárt and others,

together with a few journalists from elsewhere who were also sympathizers of the revolution (finding that the vast printing office was completely empty, but printers were available), started a new, independent, democratic, and wholeheartedly revolutionary paper in the Szabad Hón building. The first issue of this paper came out the following morning with the title Magyar Szabadság. (Hungarian Freedom). Next to the Ígazság, which started publication during the street fights, this was the first revolutionary paper in Budapest. While the last issues of the Szabad Hón were day by day burned by the crowds in the streets of Budapest, these new papers were received with tremendous sympathy and interest, though from a journalistic point of view they were rather poor.

The Szabad Hón was allowed for ever. The Communist Party paper came out on the first of November under the new title of Népszabadság (Freedom of the People). Its first editor-in-chief was Sándor Harasztí, who, on the day of the second Russian intervention, fled together with Imre Nagy to the Yugoslav Embassy and was later deported by the Russians together with Imre Nagy (in the communique published about the trial of Imre Nagy, Harasztí's role is often mentioned, though no sentence is announced concerning him). After November 4, the Kádár-regime kept the title Népszabadság. At first the paper was printed in Szolnok and edited, according to rumors, by Erzsébet Andics. Later it

came back to the Szabad Nép building and its direction was taken over by István Friss and Lajos Fehér. Fehér later received another assignment from Kádár. The editorial staff of the Népszabadság was mainly recruited from among the journalists who worked at the Szabad Nép in its last phase. Not one member of the "old guard" works for the Népszabadság (with the single exception of István György, an economic reporter with not very definite convictions). Several leading members of the last editorial staff of the Szabad Nép also refused to collaborate with the Kádár-regime. Such were Éva Katona, Kálmán Takács, Ernő Gondos, etc. Even Márton Horváth resigned from his role in the press; for a while he worked as a member of the MSZP Institute of the Hungarian Working Class Movement, ^{studying} the events preceding the revolution and ~~the~~ the history of the revolution itself. Oskár Batton, on the other hand, who for a time figured on the list of Rákosi-ists to be put aside, was again rehabilitated and is today one of the leading publicists of the Kádár-regime.
