

DULCE ET DECORUM

"Sweet and Decorous"

Memories of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution

by

CSABA HEGYVARY



THE CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB • 1980

COPYRIGHT 1979 BY CSABA HEGYVARY



DULCE ET DECORUM

NOBODY CARED for his real name. To us, as to his innumerable students before us, he was simply Horatius. Of course I am speaking of my Latin teacher, not the Latin poet. When I met him Horatius approached sixty, though no one could tell his years: he was so imbued with the Classics he seemed ageless himself. He had a lofty mind and frail body that he wrapped year after year in the same worn blue coat, fringed at the sleeves and shining at the elbows. The world, then as now, cared little for the Classics and left him poor as a church mouse.

No wonder then that a single pocket of that venerable coat could house his greatest, perhaps only treasure, a slim book, bound in scarlet leather with gilded letters declaring on its face: "Horatius Noster", "our Horatius." Horatius, the teacher, seemed to sustain himself by Horatius, the poet. He never parted with the little book and read it in the most unlikely places: on busy streetcorners, on

DULCE ET DECORUM

vaulted school corridors that reeked of mildew, the very odor of education. As he read, the stoic expression of his face slowly melted into a beatific smile: world order was restored, all vicissitudes of life could be faced with equanimity.

And equanimity he needed. In 1948, after their takeover by ruse and force, the Communist rulers of Hungary turned peace into a nightmare worse than the war. First Secretary of the Communist Party, Rakosi, spent half of his life in jails, the other half in exile in Moscow (he never said which one was worse). He returned to Hungary seething with revenge, ready to vanquish all his enemies, imagined or real. For this purpose he created the State Security Police, whose Hungarian acronym, AVO, became the symbol of beastly cruelty and the most hated word in the language.

It was child's play to get rid of the disorganized opposition parties and by 1948 Hungary had one party left, the Communist, that she has had ever since.

Next Rakosi turned against the church. After a mock trial Cardinal Mindszenty and his "gang" of priests and theology professors were sentenced for life. In fairness to other religions the AVO also imprisoned Protestant bishops and an assortment of rabbis. With opposition smitten on earth and possibly also in heaven, one could have expected peace at last. Not so!

DULCE ET DECORUM

The Minister of Interior, Rajk, who enjoyed modest popularity, caught the eye of Rakosi as a possible rival. When the headstrong Yugoslav dictator, Tito, deserted the Stalinist fold, Rajk was thrown in jail and charged with "Yugoslav Titoist conspiracy." In the jail Rajk's friend and successor Janos Kadar played a macabre farce with poor Rajk.

Rajk was to act as a "decoy" and confess to the charges — Kadar explained — to convince the world of the Titoist menace. Of course the trial will be only a show and no sentence will be carried out.

Kadar gave his word, Rajk believed, confessed — and was promptly hanged.

Not even this could abate the fratricidal fever: Kadar, the traitor of Rajk fell next. In the jail his own lieutenants tore off his fingernails with pliers while the son of the Minister of War urinated in his mouth.

These purges of courses did not remain Byzantine palace intrigues but soon spilled over into everybody's life.

The peasants were forced to enter the collective farms and give up that sliver of land that they just received in the land reform of 1945. Those who wavered were tortured or killed. Those who could fled the villages, the soil remained untilled, food had to be rationed again as during the war.

The workers, the professed darlings of Communism since Marx, did not fare better either. They

DULCE ET DECORUM

were paid by piece not by the hour and if they failed to reach a norm even that meager payment was reduced. Trade unions were abolished, strikes outlawed.

But the real blacksheep in the eye of the Party remained the intellectual middle classes. Cereemoniously they were declared a "layer" not a "class." In Communist dogma this meant nothing less than excommunication. The label "intellectual" stuck to the victim like the original sin and automatically excluded him from all but physical labor.

Fear and terror permeated even the homes. Children were ordered to spy on their parents, the parents on each other. Though there was no curfew at night, the once gay streets of Budapest lay deserted like a ghost town. One could only hear an occasional speeding car carrying AVO henchmen with deportation orders, followed by heavy trucks carrying the victims. Deportation served as an ingenious remedy for shortages in housing and also for the ails of old age. The politically unreliable elderly were deported from the cities to God-forsaken villages. Few ever came back. Their homes were turned over to the Party faithful. In their darkest hours Hungarians were honestly praying for a Third World War to deliver them from this evil world.

This evil world never penetrated the lectures of Horatius. The beauty of long-forgotten Springs

DULCE ET DECORUM

shone in the barren classroom as Horatius greeted the ominous year of 1956 chanting happily:

"Diffugere nives redeunt iam gramina
campis arboribusque comae . . ."

"The snows are fled away, leaves on the
shaws

And grasses in the mead renew their
birth . . ."

He could safely say in Latin what he could not say in Hungarian. Roman history, resurrected, seemed more timely than ever. The unbending Cato urged us to persevere, Brutus drew his dagger on our tyrants and the ignominious death of a Caligula or Nero foreshadowed the end of all despots.

Horatius did not give a fig about grades but at times he expected even the linguistically tone-deaf to know and to live by the classical lines, his favorite:

"Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori,
mors et fugacem persequitur virum . . ."

"For country 'tis a sweet and seemly
thing to die. Death ceases not from
following E'en runaway. Can youth
with feeble knees

That fears to face the battle. 'scape his
wing?"

He looked around to size us up. He never said so but I fear he trusted little our "feeble knees."

We held Horatius in too high an esteem to think of him as ordinary mortal. When during the

carnival season of 1956 he appeared with a young girl at one of the school dances, our excitement knew no bounds.

"Horatius has a mistress" — whispered somebody.

Whoever she was we charged down the corridor to see her, then filed by more placidly once we were within sight. She looked puzzled and blushed as the old man and we exchanged broad grins. She was, of course, his daughter, I had the proof immediately. She wore an old blue coat, several sizes too large. Obviously these coats ran in the Horatius family like a genetic trait. Shedding that coat transformed her from Cinderella into a Princess. After some cruising around I mustered my courage to approach her chaperon and duly introduced, — her name was Martha, — I asked her for a dance. She moved with grace and she was irresistibly pretty in spite of her mother's sartorial misdeeds. She wore no make-up and her hands were chapped (of course she helped at home with the dishes) but nothing, nothing could subtract from her charm that seemed to be beyond critique and corruption. I knew that I fell in love again, which happened to me frequently in those days.

She was my age. She planned to study languages, Latin among them, for which her father primed her since childhood. Knowing about the

DULCE ET DECORUM

market value of the classics, I took her plans as a vow of poverty.

In the small hours of the morning we walked to their home. Obliging Horatius kept trudging ahead of us and thanks to his tact I could hold her hand in that long fringed sleeve that was cozy like the Garden of Eden before the Fall. While the old man was fumbling with his house keys and a recalcitrant lock I kissed her for the first time, in haste and rather clumsily. Perhaps surprised, but positively in a bliss, her arms flew around my neck and she returned my kisses, whispering when we finally gasped for air:

"So happy, I am so happy that you don't know how to kiss either."

My sighted pride aside I was full of happiness and hope.

And hope was not entirely a figment of my imagination. On March 5, 1953 Stalin died. With the rise of Malenkov and the moderates, Rakosi had to go. A little-known grey eminence, Imre Nagy, became Prime Minister. He got in the Communist movement as innocently as Pilate in the Credo. In World War I he fought on the Eastern front, was captured, converted to the new creed and forgotten in a minor post in Russia. In 1949 he became Minister of Agriculture, but proved himself too decent for the job: he opposed the collective farms and had to resign. Resignation in those days usually

led to the gallows, but Nagy did not spend those decades in Russia in vain: he confessed **before** he was put in jail — and that spared him. He spent the great purges in comfortable obscurity as a university professor. As Prime Minister he released scores of political prisoners and righted the most blatant injustices of Rakosi. It looked as if Diogenes had found his honest man at last.

Unfortunately in 1955 the Stalinists mounted a successful counteroffensive: Nagy was ousted again, even from the Party. But this time he did not confess. He retired to the family vineyards in Transdanubia, biding his time, pruning his trees and polishing his essay on a "Communism that does not forget the human being."

He did not mingle much with people so I took a good measure when one day my neighbor in the library pointed at the desk, saying:

"That man in the grey suit is Imre Nagy."

The man in the grey suit looked impressive: good six feet tall, generously padded, particularly around the waist. There was something incongruous in his appearance: to the vaulted head of a thinker he wore the slooping moustache of a jovial parson; his nose was a homey potato but it supported an old-fashioned pincenez. For all the world he looked like a gentleman farmer who came to town and I suspected a pair of peasant boots under his smartly pressed trousers.

DULCE ET DECORUM

This meeting happened shortly after Krushchev's famous speech at the 20th Party Congress. The thaw this speech started grew into an irresistible flood. In Hungary Rakosi was sacked for good: no "confessions" could save his skin. His successor Gero, as bland as he was cruel, blundered in every undertaking. Real power slipped away from him to two organizations: the Writers' Union and a university club, the Petofi Circle, named after the foremost Hungarian poet. Poets may wield power over the soul of man but rarely over his politics. Not so in Hungary! On March 15, 1848 Petofi and his fellow writers, the Youth of March started the revolution against the Habsburgs. In the long struggle that followed Petofi was as good as his word: he fought under the Polish general Bem and fell in the last battle. He was 26 years old. Ever since Hungarians liked to wrap the cloak of Petofi around their writers and expect them to live up to his heritage. In 1956 Hungarians were not disappointed: the Literary Gazette of the Writers' Union led the attacks against the regime, the meetings of the Petofi Circle called for open revolt.

While the writers rebelled in Hungary, Poland had her gravest hours: on October 18 the Russians were marching on Warsaw where Gomulka, in open defiance asserted Poland's independence. The Petofi Circle immediately called for a demonstration of solidarity with the Poles and set the date for the

DULCE ET DECORUM

next Tuesday, October 23, 1956. Reluctantly the government consented, then a day later banned the demonstration. It would have been the first free public gathering since 1948.

On the 23rd I went to school as usual. I was a first year medical student and I had to take my mid-term exam in Anatomy on the next day. Shame or not this impending danger pushed the idea of the great demonstration in the back of my head — and head on that morning meant only a heap of bones with treacherous nooks and crannies. Surprisingly the chairman of Marxism came in during a lecture and announced:

"Comrades, the ban is lifted. You are expected to come and demonstrate. We'll meet at the Petofi statue."

"So the tactics changed. Now it'll be one of those silly marches like protesting the Voice of America," — we thought but went anyway.

The day was mild and clear, the fragrance of late blooming flowers still in the air. Hungarians call this season the Summer of the Old Ladies, many of whom were peacefully knitting on the Petofi Square. Soon a few thousand of us were milling around the statue singing the Marseillaise and patriotic songs until we ran out of repertoire. The gentle excitement of late summer picnics hung in the air. Hardly anybody noticed a young man, an actor from the National Theater, who climbed up to the

statue. With the sun behind, he was almost invisible and his voice rang out as if the statue had spoken:

"Hungarians arise, the Fatherland summons you. Now is the time or never . . ."

There was not a soul in Hungary who did not know this poem, Petofi's most famous, that the poet himself recited on the eve of the revolution in 1848.

Soon we were marching again, this time to the Bem statue. On the way the crowd swelled enormously with new groups of protesters carrying Hungarian flags.

"Down with the Russian crest" — shouted somebody.

This referred to a particularly painful insult Hungarians had to endure. On the advent of Communism the Hungarian coat of arms, the Kossuth emblem, was supplanted by a new one of Russian make. There was no time to look for old flags but surgery helped as always in emergencies. Soon all flags were flying with huge holes in the middle. A hole in place of the hammer and sickle became the symbol of the day.

The square around Bem, the Polish general who became a Hungarian national hero, was flooded with people. They just compiled the demands of the nation in twelve points, again in the tradition of Petofi. And those 12 points did not change much since 1848: freedom of speech and conscience, deliverance from foreign rule; Petofi would have found

them sadly familiar. A delegation was elected to present these 12 points to the Parliament right across the Danube. To back up, and if need be, to liberate this delegation, the demonstrators wheeled around and soon were streaming towards the huge square in front of the Parliament. The delegation dutifully entered with its 12 points just to return empty handed in a few minutes. The mood on the square turned impatient.

"Let's hear Imre Nagy" — "Imre Nagy in the government" — and a cautious "Russians go home" — echoed everywhere.

The windows of the Parliament shook and so shook the men inside. As usual the government did not know what to do and the ever-present Russian advisers also ran out of counsel. The sun just settled behind the hills of Buda and in the twilight the crowd moved like a dark angry sea.

Meanwhile Nagy, the man of the hour, was nowhere to be found. Quite unaware of what was happening he rested in his modest home after a tiring wine harvest. Somebody finally slipped away from the Parliament and literally dragged him there. Inside he was not the least welcome but out of necessity he was urged to speak. Over the huge square engulfed in darkness a single light was turned on and on a tiny balcony there stood Imre Nagy. The square fell silent.

"Dear Comrades" — he began.

The booing nearly blew him off the balcony.

"So you are booing at me?" — his voice sounded indignant and he looked ready to leave.

"We are not booing you, but no one should call us comrades again. Call us friends."

Imre Nagy was completely taken aback. His voice lost its rich velvet, he spoke in a flat monotone — without ever uttering "comrades" again.

The historical moment was not ripe — he said. Nobody knew when it would be. He will try his best if just the government would let him do it. But in the meantime let's all go home, it's late and we have to work early in the morning.

When he finished his short confused speech, nobody applauded. I felt pity for him. He could have become a national hero and he failed. Did he lack courage or did the long Communist indoctrination take hold of him? Was he not our hero but a tired, disappointed sixty year old with a heart trouble who only wanted to finish his days in peace?

Perhaps all this crossed his mind too, as after a pause he slowly intoned like a village cantor the National Anthem:

"God bless the Hungarian . . ."

It took a while before others joined him. During that time between dark sky and dark square, under a single light bulb he sang all by himself.

Disappointment aside most people heeded his

advice and went home. Only two groups decided that the labors of the day were not yet over. One group headed toward the Radio Building to request broadcasting of the 12 points, another headed toward the Stalin statue to put at least one of those points in action. I joined this second group.

The statue of Stalin stood in the Budapest woods, a large formal park. I grew up at the edge of this park, across from an old Catholic church, much like the Sacre Cocur in Paris. To make room for Stalin a section of the park was razed: the church itself had to go. This was more than my mother could take: as Stalin moved in, we moved out. Now six years later I came back to settle scores.

The statue, flaunting the mediocrity of its creator, stood in the middle of a mile long and a quarter-mile wide boulevard. By the time I arrived thousands were swarming around it. They threw a rope around Stalin's neck and a truck and a few thousand hands were trying to topple him.

"Pull, go" — but the truck engine stalled. Even now Stalin resisted. Before we could despair a middle aged man came with a blow torch. From shoulder to shoulder he climbed the pedestal on a human ladder and started to melt the bronze right behind the knee. This time Stalin could not hold out any more. He leaned forward slowly, stopped as if hesitating in midair, then fell all the fifty feet from above. The thunder of the crash drowned in the

DULCE ET DECORUM

jubilant roar of the crowd. I looked up at the pedestal. Never before did demolition create masterpieces. Now that miracle happened. On a pink granite slab, in the middle of an asphalt desert stood a pair of boots, tall as a man. Underneath it was written:

"To the great Stalin from the thankful Hungarian people."

By then the great Stalin, with a noose around his neck, was travelling down the avenue named after him. The towing truck finally deposited him at the National Theater perhaps to expiate the spirits of the past by showing them the dictator's demise. Those who had some tools immediately began to hammer, chisel, carve or any other way pry loose a piece of the statue for souvenir.

On the ground floor of an apartment house somebody placed a radio on the windowsill. Prime Minister Gero was speaking. He repeated all the worn clichés: he labelled the demonstrators Fascists, traitors and called on the imaginary masses of the proletariat to save his regime. It was too late: the proletariat just felled Stalin and was chopping him up with gusto. After Gero the radio announcer came on the air again: her voice was choked and she nearly sobbed in the microphone. In the background one could hear shots, the first shots I heard that evening.

"Who is shooting?"

Answer came as tanks were rumbling by. Tiny red flags were painted on the turrets: they were Russians.

"This is a revolution" — said somebody in a precise voice as if uttering a scientific conclusion.

"It might be" — I thought but was not so sure. Anyhow nobody knew anything for sure. The shooting waned but the tanks kept pouring in the city. Who called them?

The government — answered the radio the next morning. Prime Minister Gero did so and by this, his last blunder, provoked the uprising. The 24th of October dawned with grey clouds hanging over the city and it soon began to rain. The delirium of the previous day gave way to bitterness but not to despair. Fighting flared up everywhere.

Where did the guns come from?

In Hungary it was forbidden, on pain of death, to own arms. All the guns came from soldiers who eagerly gave away theirs. Some soldiers openly joined the revolution, many slipped away quietly. The obsession of the fallen regime with military drills in the schools literally backfired: there was hardly a teenager in Hungary who could not handle firearms.

And handle they did. In spite of threats, curfew and martial law, the streets were torn up, cars turned over and people learned the fine points of how to raise a barricade. In the exalted language

DULCE ET DECORUM

of the moment they called themselves Freedom Fighters, a term that in Hungarian particularly pleases the ear.

Freedom Fighters came in all ages. I still can see an old man walking down on a boulevard leaning on his rifle like on a cane. When a tank appeared he yelled:

"Lie down, I'll get this one."

Then he lowered himself with pain, he must have had arthritis, and fired point blank at the tank. The roar of the tank engine swallowed the heroic little pop of his rifle and I doubt that the Russians even heard him.

The main antitank weapon was the Molotov cocktail. Every aspiring wine bottle finished its career as a Molotov cocktail, incidentally the only cocktail ever named after a Russian. Thrown precisely on the exhaust pipes it could set a tank afire. But the toll was high and the desperate courage of a man with a bottle in his hands was no match for heavy armor.

Later that day I joined a small band of people as we were stopped by a Hungarian army truck.

"I've got guns" — said the breathless driver. "Go, get them."

The truck was full of Russian automatic rifles. Everybody picked one.

"No ammunition though. Get it later" — the soldier spoke in half sentences then sped away.

DULCE ET DECORUM

So I had my gun. I knew it well, we fired this type many times at targets marked "American Imperialist." It had a round magazine, we called it Russian guitar. Now I know that it looked more like a banjo.

I knew how to use it but I knew I could not use it. A bull's eye called "imperialist" was easy to hit but I could not aim that gun at another man. Perhaps I was simply a coward. Perhaps it takes more courage to kill than to be killed, for which I had ample chance that day. I left the rifle in a doorway.

The next day saw me on a more mundane mission: standing in line for food. We were only a few blocks from the Parliament and through grey mists I could see its giant dome. Suddenly there was singing on the street. Only two days ago all the streets echoed with songs, now it sounded out of place, shooting not singing was the order of the day. The singers, only about a thousand, followed a middle-aged man who looked hopelessly professorial. Indeed the group came from the Faculty of Arts and Letters. As I watched them my heart skipped a beat: Martha was among them. She wore her inevitable blue coat and a timid smile. I yelled as loud as I could until she noticed me. She waved and I waved and she started to run and I started to run and . . . and then we both stopped. Why? I still don't know. Perhaps out of sense of duty.

They marched by, row after row, young and harmless like a children's crusade. Two Russian tanks joined them: their turrets were open and the soldiers were sitting outside, smiling but hugging their weapons nonetheless. Presently they all stopped at the Parliament. In the vast space the small group looked utterly forlorn.

For minutes all was quiet and I watched only our progress at the bakery. Then something went wrong. First it sounded like slamming of doors, many doors, later it went over into a staccato drum-beat — and everybody ran for cover. I found myself in a doorway.

"Is anybody hurt?"

Nobody was. But then who fired? And on whom? Small figures were running back from the Parliament. They were stumbling, falling, bleeding and they were only a few hundred.

"The Russians, the Russians" — one of them said.

"No, it was the AVO" — said another cursing violently.

It took minutes to make sense of their stories. They were standing in the middle of the square. A small delegation went in the Parliament. They barely entered when the shooting began. Bullets showered from everywhere: from the dome of the Parliament, from the Palace of Justice, from the Ministry of Agriculture. Many people fell, some of

the friendly Russians too. The tanks panicked: some moved around the demonstrators and fired at the machine gun nests, others fired into the crowd. Lucky were those who could hide behind a friendly tank.

Unexplained as it started the carnage ended. Those who could ran away. But not for good. Reinforced by the shoppers, nobody thought of food anymore, the crowd returned. This time the tanks blocked the street, beyond them the square was abandoned, except for little humps of bodies. An ambulance drove in the square and the mysterious sniper fired again. The driver wildly careened and fled.

Burning with anger, the rest of the crowd marched to the American Embassy, only a short distance away.

"We want help, we want help" — people were chanting in every language they knew. Others just showed the blood-stained clothing.

A pale man appeared on a balcony and said something nobody understood. Still it was reassuring, somehow the world took notice.

"Eisenhower won't let us down. You remember his Inaugural Address?"

I elbowed my way through the crowd. I looked at every blue coat, at every face. Martha was not among them.

Later in the afternoon when the ambulances

were allowed to enter the square I joined one of them. They needed help and I was a medical student even if I knew only the skeleton. It did not matter anyway. Nobody was alive on Parliament Square. The fallen lay in rusty puddles of blood, on the square, on the walks, on the flower beds. The soldiers covered them with brown paperbags and we had to carry them away. Nobody knows how many died. Nobody had the heart to count.

The morgues were soon filled for the Russians closed off the main roads that also led to the cemeteries. The alive and the dead were locked in the city.

And the city itself seemed to die, slowly and valiantly. By nightfall when the shooting subsided, for the tanks did not risk to stay in the city after dark, good people were gathering everywhere. They tore up the cobblestones with pickaxes and dug up heavy clods of earth. They tenderly wrapped the mangled bodies in Hungarian flags and lowered them in humid, narrow graves. They piled up a small mound and somebody placed a rough-hewn cross at the head. There was no name on the cross. Finally they arranged little pieces of stones around the grave to keep the soil together. To me it looked like a tiny barricade, the last stand of the dead.

I got home late and once I could calm my anguished parents I called Martha. Miraculously the phone worked. One of her older brothers answered.

This was out of the ordinary. It crossed my mind that he was not supposed to be there, he had his own family. I asked for her. He kept a brief pause then he spoke.

Yes, he knew I was her friend. So I can share the sorrow as much as if I were member of the family. It all happened at the Parliament. Her classmates saw it. She fell in the first volley, maybe she did not suffer too long. Let us hope she did not die in vain. But she was so young. A gentle loving soul — he said. — Sometime later I should express my condolences to her parents, not now.

No, I certainly could not say much, just mumbled something as we both hung up. Then I wept, unable to hold my tears that were bitter of defeat and remorse yet hot as only the memory of love can be.

The massacre on Parliament Square only poured oil on the fire. Fighting raged more fiercely than ever before. At the University Hospital where I worked the wounded were lying everywhere: 30-40 in a room, on the corridors, on beds, on stretchers. They did not need much space, they were mostly teenagers. The rooms of the legendary Freedom Fighters looked more like a pediatric ward and those who did not hesitate to hurl a Molotov cocktail at a tank flinched from an injection needle.

And then the miracle happened. The Russians forayed less and less into the city, threats were

abating on the radio until one day it announced the new government: Imre Nagy was Prime Minister, Janos Kadar First Secretary of the Party. Other posts fell to former Social Democrats or at least to men who served jail terms under Rakosi. We lived in a time when a life sentence counted as a badge of honor. Colonel Maleter held the post of Minister of Defense. For all he was the hero of the revolution: he and his tank squadron went over to the side of the revolution on the first day and defended the Kilian Barrack against the most violent Russian assaults.

On the 30th of October Nagy announced the withdrawal of Russian troops and break with the one-party system. This momentous decision was of course preceded by acrimonious debates with the Russians. Seemingly the Hungarian government was united as never before.

"I am ready as a Hungarian to fight if necessary" — said the new Party chief, Kadar. "If your tanks enter Budapest I shall go into the streets and fight them with my bare hands."

Why did the Russians give in? Did this show of unity shake their resolve? Or did they just wait for the reaction of the West and buy time to regroup their shattered forces? For whatever reason, they left.

Freedom inebriated everybody like heady wine. People began to clean up the rubble. Peasants

brought truckloads of food into Budapest and gave it away free. The Hungarian radio, the main organ of Communist propaganda declared:

"In the past ten years the Hungarian Radio told only lies. It lied at day, it lied at night. From now on you will hear new voices on the old wavelengths, From now on you will hear only the truth."

In the afternoon of Saturday, November 3, people were sitting in the coffeehouses, sipping a vile substitute coffee and dreaming of the old days of peace that dawned upon us again. Did not Imre Nagy declare just the day before that Hungary wants to leave the Warsaw Pact and become a neutral state?

"You'll see we shall be the second Austria" — the optimists assured each other.

Their dream was as real as the imitation coffee. The Russians left Budapest but not the country. Slowly they formed a giant ring around the city, some 20 miles away. Fresh troops were streaming through the borders. Janos Kadar mysteriously disappeared. The Russians invited Colonel Maleter and he never returned. Radio Vienna reported that Austrian borderguards saw waves of Russian bombers flying toward Budapest.

Uneasy night fell on the city. Next morning, November 4, I awakened at five o'clock; work at the hospital started early. The deathly silence of the night was suddenly broken by rattle and rumble. I opened the window: below in the street three

DULCE ET DECORUM

Russian tanks maneuvered into porcupine position. I rushed to the radio.

The early morning music was interrupted.

"This is Imre Nagy speaking" — said a deep voice. "Today at daybreak Soviet forces started attack against our capital, obviously with the intention to overthrow the legal, democratic Hungarian government.

Our troops are fighting.

The government is in place.

This is my message to the people of our country and to the entire world."

Nobody ever heard Imre Nagy again. Listening to his last message, I remembered how he was heckled just ten days before and I heard his voice singing alone over Parliament Square. He proved his hecklers wrong. He put his brief allotted time to the best use: he spoke for his nation. Who could have done more? In less than two years the same radio would announce his execution. He was tried on foreign soil, probably in Romania. He had only to admit to the charges of "Western conspiracy" to have his life spared. He refused. He perhaps thought of his last essay when he said at his trial:

"I have twice tried to save the honor and image of Communism in the Danubian valley, once in 1953 and once in 1956. If my life is needed to prove that not all Communists are enemies of their fellow-men, I gladly make the sacrifice."

DULCE ET DECORUM

The minutes of the Free Hungarian Radio were numbered. After Imre Nagy the dramatist Hay read the plea for help of the Writers' Union. As a last message to the free world somebody read the Gettysburg Address in Hungarian.

Then the airwaves fell silent. But the skies thundered and lighted up with artillery fire that lasted for three hours. Buildings shook and windows shattered like in an earthquake. This time the bombers finished off what the cannonade left.

The fresh troops, mostly Kirghiz, were strong and cruel. And yet resistance did not slacken. As so many times in history the fortress of Buda held out longest. Its heavy walls defied Russian cannons now as they defied the Turkish ones centuries ago; the tanks could not scale its narrow tortuous streets. The last refuge of the defenders was an old cloister beside the Mathias Church, the coronation place of Hungarian kings. When ammunition ran out the last twenty-two defenders, all of them university students, were captured. The Russians lined them up on a square under the statue of Trinity — and mowed them down with machine guns. The bodies were carted away to unknown places. No monument stands to their memory, even the cloister disappeared, having given up its place to a Hilton hotel.

In the afternoon the radio came on the air again. It played "Alexander's Ragtime Band" and "Tales of the Vienna Woods." Between two waltzes

the suddenly resurfaced Janos Kadar read his manifesto. Somewhere in the Russian camp he formed a new government. To date this was his last treason. He betrayed his friend, Rajk, his fellow ministers in the Nagy government, even his own words: he did not fight the tanks with bare hands, he rode them in triumph.

In those desperate days Hungarians looked to the West for help. But the West only watched. Sometimes an idle spectator is not better than an accomplice. The United Nations, so generous at times with its peace-keeping forces, did not send a single soldier. But then there is not much oil in Hungary.

"We were sold out in Yalta, we are sold out again" — Hungarians complained bitterly.

The President of the United States summed up the Western attitude, saying:

"We never encouraged and will never encourage open revolt by defenseless populations against superior powers."

It's good George Washington held a different opinion. Anyhow defenseless populations have had the intolerable habit of rising against superior powers since the dawn of history and mankind will respect the memory of Leonidas of Thermopylae long after the presidents of superior powers will be forgotten.

On November 27 Kadar returned to Budapest

to unleash a wave of retribution and terror. He could silence the guns but could not silence the typewriters. A flood of leaflets and posters swept over the city. Most of them had the life span of a fallen leaf but one rekindled, once more, the spirit of defiance. It was a short leaflet that simply read:

"This Saturday afternoon, between 3 and 4 o'clock, free elections will be held in Budapest. Those who support the Kadar regime should go on the streets. Those who oppose it should stay at home and light a candle."

For a week everybody spoke only about the "election" — and the government prohibited the sale of candles. Saturday afternoon at exactly three o'clock the few buses and streetcars stopped and everybody scurried to the nearest house. There they gathered on the corridors or sat on the stairs as so many sparrows. But that afternoon there were no strangers: soon everybody was invited in one of the apartments. We also had a visitor, a middle-aged man in shabby clothes. The wrinkles of his face were full of soot that made him look like a woodcut.

He worked at the railroad — he said. Of course they were on strike now just like everybody else.

How long?

He did not know. It's hard without an income. But he'll manage. The children are all gone.

Abroad?

Yes, one is in Austria. If he had not left he

DULCE ET DECORUM

would be deported by now. So many are. How many left for Austria? Thousands, ten thousand, perhaps more. The nation will fall apart like sheaves in the wind.

He said that. He really said that, though he looked like the last man to speak in metaphors. But then it was not an ordinary occasion.

Mother brought in bread and cheese and red wine, that was all we had. As the day faded outside, in the light of a few candles our shadows grew enormous on the wall like the somber saints of Ribera. We spoke in low voice, almost in whispers and broke the bread and sipped the wine. I felt strangely transposed to a time when all this happened before.

"And he took the bread and gave thanks and broke it and gave onto them saying:

This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me.

Likewise also the cup after supper, saying:

This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you."

The fresh sacrifice gave new meaning to old rites like pouring new wine in old jugs. For that afternoon we had our last communion with the spirit of days past, with the memories of victory and defeat, with the memory of the dead. The revolution was over.

EPILOGUE.

On All Saints' Day of 1957 I joined the pilgrimage to the statue of the Unknown Soldier in a cemetery outside Budapest. The whole city did so. On the first anniversary of the revolution all gatherings were forbidden but not even the government had power over the resting place of the dead.

I liked that monument though the unknown sculptor did not do much justice to the Unknown Soldier. But it was moving as the little soldier leaned heavily on his rifle and jerked his head with pain toward the sky. All year long few people distracted the soldier from watching the clouds or the lilac bushes around. Now the peace of his lonely world was shattered. The meadow around him all but vanished. Rows of crosses stood in place of the wildflowers and the white limestone bore no names. With a pain that was almost physical, I remembered the dead I helped to bury, the graves on the streets and how they slowly disappeared as the wounds of the city healed.

Few paces ahead of me an old man was fumbling with his candle. His coat had been blue one day. Without that coat I could not have recognized him he aged so much. He was Horatius. At last his candle was burning and I knew for whom; I lighted one myself.

In the reflection of candles the crosses were ablaze and high above the soldier stood like a martyr at the stakes. Under him, on the pedestal, it read:

"Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori . . ."

I only hoped the old man did not see it. That line, his favorite, was now inscribed for a frail gentle girl, his daughter, also. And that line did not speak the truth: the young under the crosses proved their worth, but was their death sweet or did they die for the ultimate vanity of decorum or glory? No, I could not believe that. I wished I could have erased that line and carve words in that stone, words more worthy of their memory.

When their Master decided on his last journey to Jerusalem, all the disciples lost heart, only Thomas said:

"Let us also go so that we may die with him."

Thomas did not seek glory, did not call for revolt, did not even want to cut off the ear of the High Priest's servant. He spoke because his faith, his loyalty, his love were stronger than death. And that is the legacy of the fallen in those unmarked graves. Salvation does not come without sacrifice on earth, and for the resurrection of a single man or of a whole nation, the faithful, the brave has to lay down his life.

"Let us also go so that we may die with him."

THIS PAPER WAS WRITTEN FOR THE CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB AND READ BEFORE THE CLUB ON MONDAY EVENING, THE TWENTY-NINTH OF JANUARY, NINETEEN HUNDRED AND SEVENTY-NINE. THIS EDITION OF THREE HUNDRED COPIES WAS PRINTED FOR THE CLUB IN THE MONTH OF SEPTEMBER, NINETEEN HUNDRED AND EIGHTY.

PRINTED IN U.S.A.