



REVOLUTION GAMES

IT BEGAN AS A JOYRIDE, TWO SNUB-NOSED BUSES WITH OLYMPIC BANNERS HUNG FROM THE GRILLS, RUMBLING NORTH TOWARD THE CZECH BORDER. OVER THE PREVIOUS WEEK STUDENTS AND WORKERS HAD RISEN UP TO CAST OUT HUNGARY'S BRUTAL, CORRUPT COMMUNIST GOVERNMENT—A REGIME THAT IN ITS ZEAL TO PLEASE MOSCOW HAD BEEN EVEN MORE STALINIST THAN THE U.S.S.R.'S. THE SOVIETS, WHO PAID HUNGARIANS A THIRD OF THEIR PRODUCTS' VALUE, ONLY TO SELL THEM AGAIN AT THREE TIMES THEIR WORTH? HAZA! (GO HOME!)

The AVO, Hungary's 30,000-member secret police, which terrorized a population of fewer than 10 million? *Haza* too!

After a week of excruciating uncertainty, the leaders of the revolution had decided that a Hungarian delegation would indeed compete in Melbourne, at the 1956 Olympics, under the flag the rebels had remade by shearing away the hammer and sickle.

From the Red Star Hotel, their aerie on Budapest's Svabhegy Hill, the Olympic swimmers, divers and water polo players had heard the gunfire and seen the smoke rise. They were told of AVO snipers strafing civilians who had peacefully assembled outside Parliament, of citizens pulling down Stalin's statue in Heroes' Square, of Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev accepting the revolutionaries' demands to withdraw Soviet tanks and troops. Even a few athletes caught the spirit, yanking the red star from the facade of the hotel.

So on the day the Hungarian team shipped out, Oct. 30, it seemed only a formality that the new, reformist prime minister, Imre Nagy, would declare the end of single-party rule. From their homes and training venues the Olympians picked their way to the buses, past charred automobile husks and uncollected corpses. For 18-year-old diver Joe Gerlach, the revolution had done nothing less than make him an Olympian. *Why are we sending so many minders and hacks, freeloaders with dandruff on their lapels, to Australia?* someone had asked. *It's a new day!* So Gerlach became one of 11 athletes subbed in for bureaucrats at the last minute. "My best friend asked if there was any chance I wouldn't be coming back," remembers fencer Daniel Magay. "I told him, 'No way.' We had a free Hungary."

But much more was happening on Oct. 30. As the Olympic buses headed out of the country, Soviet leaders were finalizing plans to send the tanks back in. Britain, France and Israel had just attacked Egypt to prevent the nationalization of the Suez Canal, ensuring that the world would be distracted when the U.S.S.R. invaded Hungary several days later. The athletes on the buses didn't know that their week of freedom was about to end. Nonetheless, Hungarians share an abiding dread born of centuries as a doormat to more powerful neighbors. You can hear their world-weariness in an old expression that alludes to the Turkish domination of Hungary in the 16th and 17th centuries, when the foreign occupiers would propose extortionate terms over postprandial coffee: "The black soup is still to come."

The Olympic delegation was to fly to Australia from Prague, but the pro-Moscow Czech government considered the Magyars to be carriers of a virus. As Hungarian officials spent a week trying to secure a French plane out, the Czechs quarantined the Olympians in a school outside the capital, with access only to sketchy news reports. Suspicion set in, then fears of the worst. "How are

my parents?" water polo player Istvan Hevesi wrote in his journal on Nov. 7, the day the team was finally cleared to leave. "The Olympics, the whole thing has lost its importance, its beauty, because of what's happening back home."

In the postwar years Hungarian athletes had turned sports into rallies for national glory. Little Hungary had placed third in the medal count at the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki, behind the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. A year later Ferenc Puskas and Hungary's soccer team, the Golden Squad, so dominated England in a 6-3 victory at London's Wembley Stadium that English captain Billy Wright called them "the finest team ever to sort out successfully the intricacies of this wonderful game." After England lost 7-1 in the return match in 1954, forward Syd Owen pronounced the Hungarian players "people from outer space."

The black soup was served four days later, cold. When the Hungarian delegation touched down in Darwin, Australia, Miklos (Nick) Martin, a water polo player who read English, found a newspaper in the transit lounge and shared its reports: A quisling named Janos Kadar had cut a deal with Moscow to preside over a new puppet regime. Some 200,000 Soviet troops had flooded back in, killing thousands of Hungarians and routing Nagy's newborn government. Hevesi would later tell the makers of *Freedom's Fury*, the 2006 documentary about Hungary's '56 Olympic water polo victory over the Soviets, "By the time we got on the plane it had turned into a counterrevolution—meaning they had begun to shoot us, goddamn them." The Hungarians had yet to reach Melbourne, and already they were asking questions that would haunt them for weeks: *Are my family and friends safe? Have they escaped? What kind of country would later execute? And: Should I go home at all?*

SEVERAL HUNDRED Hungarian émigrés turned out at Melbourne's Essendon Airport to greet the team. They tossed red, white and green bouquets and waved flags with the pre-Communist Kossuth crest, now adorned with a black mourning stripe. The delegation soon raised that new flag outside its quarters in the Olympic village. On Nov. 22 the U.S.S.R. took custody of Nagy, whom the Kadar regime would later execute; that same day Hungarian athletes turned their backs on the Soviets at the opening ceremonies.

The team's compound had already become a hothouse of angst and conflicting reports. Cables began to arrive from home, many over the signatures of relatives, imploring athletes to return. But these often raised suspicions: The family members might have failed to include a prearranged code or in a subsequent phone call might make exactly the opposite plea. "We heard the revolution had been put down," recalls Susie

WHAT BECAME OF THEM?

For updates on all the Olympic athletes who defected from Hungary at the 1956 Games, plus a video documentary including interviews by Alexander Wolff with surviving defectors in the U.S., go to SI.com/more