



Ordogh Zimsen, then a 16-year-old swimmer, “and that they were scooping up youngsters on the street and sending them on Siberian vacations.”

The extent of the carnage back home—as many as 25,000 dead or wounded; ultimately some 20,000 arrests and hundreds of executions—had only begun to emerge. The figure of more immediate concern was even harder to determine: Who were among the hundreds of thousands who had fled? “A great spiritual depression,” as long jumper Olga Gyarmaty described it, afflicted the team, which wouldn’t come close to duplicating its performance in Helsinki. But it won gold medals in gymnastics, fencing and, most famously, water polo.

With minutes to go in the semifinal between Hungary and the U.S.S.R., Soviet captain Valentin Prokopov drew the blood of Ervin Zador with a sucker punch. Hungarian fans rushed to the parapet that girdled the pool, forcing the referee to intervene and award Hungary a truncated 4–0 victory. The crowd at what came to be called the “blood in the water” match raised the same cry that had rung through Budapest a few weeks earlier: “*Ruszkik hazá!* [Russians go home!]”

The water polo players, rallying to the realization that this was their last stand as a team, would beat Yugoslavia in the final. But most of the other Hungarian athletes, deprived of critical training time and preoccupied by events back home, saw their Olympics end in disappointment. “You go to the greatest competition in the world,” recalls diver Frank Siak, “and all you’re thinking about is a decision you’ll be making that will affect the rest of your life.”

For some, deciding to return home came relatively easily. Gymnast Olga Tass had a disabled daughter and swore by the care she received from her doctors in Hungary. Boxer Laszlo Papp, who won his third gold medal in three Olympics, had a wife, an 18-month-old son and the comfortable life of an Eastern bloc sports celebrity. For a few others, deciding to *defect* was just as easy. The Hungarian regime had targeted Magay’s parents because of their extensive landholdings, and they were now squatters barred from working. The parents of canoeist Istvan Hernek had been detained by the AV0 and his mother nearly beaten to death.

But for most of the Hungarian Olympians it was a much harder call. Swimmer Valeria Gyenge’s fiancé had escaped and told her to wait for him in Melbourne, but her mother wailed through the phone line at the news that her little girl wouldn’t be coming home. Gymnast Attila Takach cabled home asking if he should “visit Paola,” who lived in Los Angeles, and his mother replied, “Send my love to Aunt Paola,” giving him her blessing to leave. Nevertheless, “it was misery,” Takach said a few weeks before his death at 82



SHATTERED HOPES

After the uprising, thousands of Hungarians were killed in violent reprisals, which left parts of Budapest in ruins.

**AS THE OLYMPIC
BUSES HEADED
OUT OF HUNGARY,
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WERE FINALIZING
PLANS TO SEND
THE TANKS BACK IN.**

in February 2011. “We didn’t know what to decide. When the SPORTS ILLUSTRATED offer came through, many of us decided to go with that.”

SEVERAL DAYS after the Hungarians reached Melbourne, SI writer Whitney Tower had sent a memo to his boss, managing editor Sid James, proposing a daring operation. Tower was

related by marriage to Hungary’s exiled royal family, and one of his in-laws, a New York–based count named Anthony Szapary, hoped to bring Hungarian athletes from Melbourne to the U.S. as refugees. SI was then barely two years old and was alarming Time Inc. founder Henry Luce with its financial losses. But Luce valued the anti-Communist cause as much as profits. The company’s flagship magazine, TIME, would honor the Hungarian Freedom Fighter as its Man of the Year. It made perfect sense that Szapary and George Telegdy, the secretary of Hungary’s sports federation, would try to enlist the magazine company in their efforts.

Time Inc. vice president C.D. Jackson endorsed the appeal as soon as it hit his desk. Jackson had served as a psychological warfare expert for the OSS during World War II and instantly grasped the operation’s propaganda potential. One member of SI’s Olympic contingent, writer Coles Phinizy, hadn’t yet left for Australia, so on

Nov. 19, after boarding a flight in New York City, he worked out a code for all cable communications during the operation (it was the Cold War, after all) and mailed it back to the office while stopping over in San Francisco. Phinizy used a proposed Australian Rules Football tour as his cover. A reference to “one full team” would mean 30 defectors; “one full team and six substitutes,” therefore, was 36. “Football Federation” would stand for U.S. State Department. “Tour of more than a month” would denote U.S. permanent residency or citizenship. “Len Turner” was miler Laszlo Tabori; “George Kramer,” water polo star Gyorgy Karpati; “Greg Turnbull,” Count Szapary’s fixer George Telegdy; and so on. Phinizy also carried a copy of Tower’s memo outlining the operation and hand delivered it to the man in charge of SI’s Melbourne Olympic coverage, assistant managing editor Andre Laguerre.

Perhaps no one had a better grasp of geopolitics, sports and the immigrant experience than Laguerre. The eldest child of a French diplomat and an upper-class Englishwoman, Laguerre had spent his teenage years in San Francisco, where he hung out at Pacific Coast League baseball games and worked as a copyboy at the *Chronicle*. In his 20s he covered Neville Chamberlain’s sellout to Hitler in Munich for the French newspaper *Paris-Soir*. When Germany attacked France, Laguerre enlisted in the French army and was plucked, shrapnel in his neck, from the waters off Dunkirk. He eventually became press