



A WOLO ENTERTAINMENT PRODUCTION

# FREEDOM'S FURY

## American documentary on 1956, the Olympics, the Hungarian-Soviet water polo semi-final, and a bloody smack.

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*This year we (in Hungary) will be exposed to more films and documentaries than usual, in connection with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Revolution of 1956. Over the last few months there has been much talk about the feature produced by Andy Vajna about the bloody and adventurous story of the Hungarian-Soviet water polo match at the Melbourne Olympics, cut short under scandalous circumstances. The story has also captured the attention of others. After several years of work, an American sister and brother team, Megan Raney Aarons and Colin Keith Gray, finished a documentary entitled Freedom's Fury, Edited by Michael Rogers, on the same topic. The film, Produced by Kristine Lacey and Executive Produced by Andrew Vajna, Quentin Tarantino, Amy Sommer and Lucy Liu, will soon be in Hungarian theaters. We spoke with the film's creators at the Hungarian Film Week in Budapest.*

**Colin Gray:** The film is the product of fortunate coincidences. I played water polo as a high school student in Canada and was familiar with the success story of Hungarian water polo as well as the legendary story of the Olympic semi-final. There are also a lot of Hungarian immigrants in Canada who arrived after '56, so I heard a lot about the Revolution and the reprisals that followed it's defeat. My coach, Bence Quittner, was trained by Dezso Gyarmati, who was a member of the Hungarian national team at the Melbourne Olympics. Ben helped us to make a film intertwining the stories of the Hungarian-Soviet match in Melbourne and the Revolution of 1956. This was when I was still a university student in Michigan, which is where I know Lucy Liu from. We talked a lot about the relationship between dictatorship and freedom during the time of the Tienannmen Square demonstrations in 1989.

When Megan and I started filming together, I told her the story of the Hungarian-Soviet game and we decided to make a film about it. We collected material and did fundraising for years. Lucy Liu's help came at a very good time and we were very grateful for it. She joined the production early on and found it very important that the story has significance over and beyond it's own framework. Lucy was filming *Kill Bill* with Tarantino at the time and told him about the film. Tarantino, who had heard about the Hungarian Revolution, but not about the Olympic water polo match, called it "the best story never told" and joined the project. Andrew Vajna joined us in the last round. We sent him our material when we had run out of the money we needed to finish the film, and he joined the production in exchange for our consent to his making his own feature film about the same story.

[www.freedomsfury.com](http://www.freedomsfury.com)



*The film tells the story from two unique perspectives: the chronicle of Hungary's post WWII history and the Revolution is superimposed with the events of the Olympic water polo semi-final. In this way not only is the theme universal, so is the narrative structure. Events of large-scale politics (the dark years of Stalinism, the Revolution of 1956 and the reprisals which followed its defeat) are intertwined with the personal stories of the film's heroes, the Hungarian and Soviet national water polo team members, as almost direct motivating forces. The story revolves around an almost folk tale character, "the youngest boy", Ervin Zádor, who became a member of the Hungarian national water polo team as a youth from a small team, a few years before the Olympics, and became one of it's leading characters. He received the huge slap that initiated the skirmish and scandal during the last minutes of the semi-final. Zádor's bloody face is the emblem of the story...*

**Megan Raney:** We featured Zádor's character deliberately, and not only because of the slap. His story is incredibly exciting and dense – although I would add so was almost everyone else's on the team. We felt it was important to tell Zádor's story as a "through line story", because it would make it easier for the audience to empathize with him this way: not only did Zádor fight his way to the top as a young, inexperienced player coming from a small team, but the incredible drama of his 1956 story, his family, freedom, patriotism and career all come together. During the early days of the Revolution when the team was hidden away in the Buda hills not knowing whether they'd be able to go to the Olympics or not, Zádor escapes from the camp to go see his family in town. And then, after the bloody semi-final and the Olympic gold medal, he does not return to Hungary. Just think of what he gave up by making this decision! He could have been one of the world's best players, a key figure of the Hungarian national team for years, maybe even a decade. But he just didn't want to, couldn't, return home after the defeat of the Revolution.

**Colin Gray:** There are some narratives in the film that follow traditional patterns. But they are not in opposition to authenticity. As a documentary film maker I feel the way we depict the stories we find, the way in which we tell them, is very important. Every topic, every idea, branches out in a thousand directions as soon as one begins to explore it. An important consideration while making *Freedom's Fury* was finding the right proportions. How much do we say, and for how long, about Hungarian history and the Revolution? How do we evoke the decisive water polo game and the event leading up to it? We wanted the film to be interesting and exciting not only for a western audience, but for a Hungarian audience as well. While making the film we were often told that Hungarians in their teens and twenties know very little, if at all, about their recent history. This film is also for them.

**Megan Raney:** While preparing ourselves for filming we did a lot of research and read a lot. We came to Hungary several times to collect background information. Then we filmed 150 hours of material. That's much too much. It would have been easy to get lost in it. We needed a central theme and Zádor's story was just that. We were able to arrange the various strands of the story around him and the legendary slap.

*The introduction of the film dealing with Hungary's history after 1945 is primarily geared toward a foreign audience. Did it occur to you to make two versions of the film?*

**Megan Raney:** Not to mention that the introduction was a full 50 minutes long in the first version of the film... And when we saw it we felt we were able to provide a concise and detailed picture – but this was "only" the background, we haven't even begun to tell our story! In the final 90 minute version the background information amounts to only 8 minutes, and as I mentioned earlier hopefully Hungarian viewers won't find it either boring or biased.



*I presume it was your intent to have politicians, historians and intellectuals speak about the Revolution and the reprisals that followed (Rácz Sándor, Mécs Imre, Gyenes Judit, Pomogáts Béla, Kósa Ferenc, Király Béla) who are from completely different political poles of present-day Hungarian political-cultural life.*

**Colin Gray:** We were not interested in present-day political differences, but rather how to portray the events as authentically as possible from various different perspectives. This is why we found it exciting to interview Nkhikita Khrushchev's son. Historians have obviously uncovered the decisions and motivation of Soviet political leaders, but for us it was just as important to listen to the son of the Soviet Union's leader at that time who provided an interesting and personal perspective of the events. Let us not forget that *Freedom's Fury* is precisely about the dramatic point of intersection of world politics and personal history. And this is precisely what the interview with the son of the Soviet Union's one-time political leader demonstrates, in a very exciting way: today Khrushchev's son is an American citizen and a research fellow at an American University!

*And as he speaks we see Life magazine front pages decorating the walls of his office...*

**Megan Raney:** Exactly! It was these sudden changes of a person's life that intrigued us. We had a lot of help with researching background information in both America and Hungary. It was an incredible experience, for example, to find that there is contemporary footage of Béla Rajki (trainer of the Hungarian national water polo team) training his team!

**Colin Gray:** It is fantastic footage, even today: a trainer, who is a genius, at work training a super team. I was totally nonplussed when I saw the footage, not only as a one-time water polo player, but as a filmmaker as well. Tricky underwater images, montages – it's visually fascinating.

*You used a lot of it in your film...*

**Colin Gray:** Of course! We couldn't leave it out. I think viewers today will have a feeling of just how good the 1956 Hungarian water polo players were from this footage and other archive sports films.

**Megan Raney:** Another fantastic experience for us was when the Hungarian and Soviet national teams met 2002. They hadn't seen each other for almost fifty years, but they had detailed memories of everything. Zádor, Gyarmati, Kárpáti, Bolvári, and Misa and the other Russian water polo players are unbelievably nice and still energetic. The way they reminisced about the adventures of the match...! The slap was a hard one, but that's the kind of sport it is. Zádor's bloody face was in the papers all over the world. The referee had to blow the whistle on the game before it was officially over to avoid any further fighting or scandal. Hungary won, 4:0.

Today all this is history, just like what the Russians say in the film, that as far as they knew at the time socialism had to be defended against a bloody Hungarian rebellion...

**Colin Gray:** We learned a lot from our heroes, from the people we got to know while making the film. The scene in which Rácz Sándor describes the moment the Stalin statue was pulled down, the euphoria of a thousand people holding their breath and then breathing again at the same time, speaks volumes about what it must have felt like. This is why we hope many people will see our film, and feel that it is theirs.