

Michał Przeperski

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Hungarian Revolution seen 50 years later from Poland

The Hungarian Revolution in 1956 is a thing with which I was familiarized when I learned the history of Poland, because of the strong connection between political events of that time in Hungary and Poland. Obviously, textbooks were not the first sources of historical knowledge. In my case there were my grandfather's stories that showed the similarities between those two histories and their importance. Finally, I hit upon an idea of writing about the ways of commemorating the Hungarian Revolution in Poland by giving my various personal experiences as well as a few words about surprising conclusions that I came to.

Studying at the University of Warsaw I would have to be blind in order not to recognize information about the events organized under the banner of commemorating the Hungarian Revolution 1956 (take as an example the Karta Center Foundation's open-air exhibition near the University). The discussion about October 1956 in Budapest is mainly interesting for those, who were involved unfortunately in the events of the Polish October 1956.

Searching for signs of interest in what had taken place in 1956 in Hungary, I decided to make a short review among my friends. I found them as quite a representative group. There were five people asked about what had taken place at that time and what their attitude towards it is. Only one person, actually the only one of them interested in history, was able to tell me that October 1956 is a symbol of Hungarian Insurrection and their fight against the Soviet domination. Two of them started to connect this expression with Stalin's death, one mentioned Władysław Gomułka's name (polish First Secretary of the communist party, that come to power due to October 1956 in Poland) and one gave up. What is really sad is that they are all students, graduates of one of the best secondary school in the district where my hometown is situated in. So this is the background of the debate about 1956 among young people in Poland.

Obviously, given the people that remember 1956 because they lived then, they are usually more aware of what had happened. My grandfather told me about his experiences. He was a student of the last year of economy at The Poznań University of Economics, in the city that is thought to have started changes in Hungary in 1956. “I remember the debates about the situation in Poland that had taken place since the beginning of October. And after that, about the 20th of October, something new started to happen there. Everything went fast. Happiness and mobilization was enormous, everyone was in favor of the Hungarian efforts. When the Soviet Army invaded Hungary, we started to organize blood transfusions for those that could need it because of the wounds suffered during the insurrection. Finally, their hopes went away. Totally unexpectedly for us.” This is the part of the history that all my family is familiar with, but I am afraid not all the families in Poland can be taught by its seniors about what really had happened. It is even harder to understand why that is the way it is. Maybe because people are simply too lazy to listen to such stories? I would not say the reason is the older people's unwillingness to share their knowledge and experiences... One way or another, sometimes the textbooks may be enough, but the exhibitions organized all around Poland are a unique opportunity to form our own notions based on the real sources, not only on the tales or given facts. The situation is similar with the web forums, at which everyone is allowed to express freely their opinions. Last but not least, it has to be said that easily accessible media such as television or newspapers are shaping awareness of what has happened in a crucial manner.

Thanks to the special relations between Hungary and Poland in 1956 there were a lot of programs about the revolution. Here are two examples from the Polish TV.

‘1956 was a great explosion. Firstly, Hungarians were with Poles. First they helped us, later we helped them. It was something extraordinary. People gathered in queues in order to give blood for the blood transfusions. Blankets and medicines were collected to send them to Hungary’, reminisced a famous Polish journalist Stefan Bratkowski. ‘It was a stress which Hungarians did not break free from. It was a hecatomb. Corps of the killed, city almost fully destroyed. Memory of this revolution was imprinted in the heads of the entire generation’, added Bratkowski, the honorary chairman of the Polish Journalists Society.¹



Relations between Hungary and Poland were and are bilateral, so Hungarian guests were present in the Polish television as well. Here is a voice of Akos Engelmayer from the Hungarian Institute in Warsaw.

‘It is painful for me that the ceremony devoted to the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the revolution took place in such an atmosphere. It was a provocation organized by the government. The Police’s behavior was shattering, indeed’, said Akos Engelmayer. The former ambassador of Hungary in Poland reminisced 1956 as the time both wonderful and terrific. ‘There were splendid moments as well as fearful. It formed me as a person, it determined my life. It is imprinted strongly, very deeply in my mind’



‘The bells were ringing, candles in the windows, covers in tanks closed and the streets full of us with bottles with >Molotov cocktails<. We were sure we'd won. We did not know that another invasion was being prepared, another and much stronger one. The 23rd of October is a great day of happiness, freedom and youth’, ended Engelmayer.²

Those two examples are very typical, usually guests and generally those speaking about the revolution focused mainly on how heroic the Hungarian attitude was and how it was imprinted in the former generations’ life. Usually, information about the ceremonies of the 50th anniversary or generally about the revolution in the Polish media were combined and compared with the information about the present crisis. Another former ambassador of Hungary in Poland, Ivan Baba, expressed his opinion about the protests of the current 23rd of October.

Do you think that the government lost control over the situation? Shooting using the rubber bullets and brutal putting down the protests...?

‘Perhaps the entire nation is surprised with the Police’ brutality, because such a thing has not happened since 1956. Water cannons are present at the football matches; a month ago they were used in Budapest, but rubber bullets...?’

How did you feel when the T-34 tank was being stolen during the protest?

‘It was quite an absurd situation. It looked like a grotesque joke, but in a crowd everything might happen’.³

The general conclusion is that the debate over what was and what is going on in Hungary is present in many places, what is undoubtedly good news. Unfortunately, it has to be emphasized that a lot of Poles do not have any idea what is this all about, including – as I proved it – academic youth. And the exceptions of the students of history, sociology or social studies only confirm the rule. Another thing is that the present day in Hungary after 50 years is surprisingly similar to the past, and it could be an unexpected rap for everybody. Finally, from our (Polish) perspective it is easier to comment the Hungarian Revolution rather than the Polish October, the Polish Revolution that has not been put down suddenly but died slowly after two, three years. We are jealous about the glory of the Hungarian insurgents because, although they suffered, the history said that they were right. What about those involved in the Polish Revolution? These questions are hardly present in our debate...

¹ <http://www.tvn24.pl/350120,467725,odcinek.html>

² <http://www.tvn24.pl/350120,467934,odcinek.html>

³ <http://serwisy.gazeta.pl/swiat/1,34264,3701482.html>

Zitierempfehlung:

Michał Przeperski, Hungarian Revolution seen 50 years later from Poland, in: Zeitgeschichte-online, Themenportal Ungarn 1956 – Geschichte und Erinnerung,

URL: <http://www.zeitgeschichte-online.de/portals/_ungarn1956/documents/przeperski.pdf>