

Most people heading for work had no idea what was going on, but after catching some phrases from the highly excited youngsters on the streets and glancing at their list of demands, word quickly spread that what happened in Poland was happening here!

In no time offices and shops were abuzz with the news. As more and more people arrived at work, they brought further news about the students' march and of their plan to broadcast their program over the radio. Work virtually stopped as employees gathered in groups to read the printouts, most of them with unabashed enthusiasm, some with cautious reserve. Everyone had an opinion. It was about time that someone dared to speak up! Twelve years of Russian occupation was twelve years too long! Out with them! People had the right to know what happened with the nation's uranium! Hungary had paid war reparations to the Russians long enough! How about the people the Russkies dragged to Siberia? How many were still alive? Bring them home! Let's get some answers! If we all stand up as one, they can't silence an entire nation!

Foolish talk, countered the pessimists. There was no sense getting excited over something that had no chance to succeed. This nation no longer had the guts to rise up. For one thing, it was too divided. What do these young kids think? Playing David against the Russian Goliath? Even if organized, sooner or later someone would alert the AVO and that would be the end of it. So why bother?

But the doomsayers were in the minority and their voices were fast silenced into shame. And so it was at the office of the Institute of Industrial Planning, where Sári began working on October 1. It took her a while to find a job, but finally she landed there, working in statistics. As everyone else, she was caught up in the highly charged debate whether to leave and join the demonstration, or wait and see what developed. The place resembled an overturned beehive and pulsated with excitement as suddenly the door opened and in marched the office manager, Mrs. Steiner, a staunch member of the Party and in charge of political education. Raising her hand, she announced on good authority that the Party was already in contact with the student leaders regarding their legitimate proposals to correct some of the errors of the previous government. Comrades Gero and Kadar were at that very moment on their way back from a constructive meeting with Marshal Tito in Yugoslavia, and would sit down to confer with the student delegates later in the day.

“Stay calm and return to your work,” she said. “The Party will see to it that, within reason, all requests will be granted.”

“We’ve heard that before and nothing ever happens! It’s just another lie!” someone shouted.

“It’s too late for promises! People have lost all confidence in the leadership!” another voice claimed.

“And just what do you consider ‘within reason’? Does it include the withdrawal of the Russian troops?”

“The Soviets are here for security reasons in agreement with the Warsaw Pact,” Mrs. Steiner retorted. “Their removal would upset the unity of the social-bloc; everyone can understand that!”

“Not everyone, Comrade Steiner! The truth is that the Party is afraid that without the Russians they’d be ousted, kicked out, as they should be! Let them pack up and leave with their Big Brothers so we can be free to build a true democracy, as we started in 1945!”

“That is nonsense! It’s true that the Rakosi regime made grave mistakes, but no one can deny the tremendous improvements the Party has made in the past seven years! And with the new leadership the country is heading for even greater achievements, but you must have patience. You are risking the future by rocking the boat.”

She was practically shouted down with that last remark. Rocking the boat? If people were so happy with those “tremendous improvements,” they wouldn’t take to the streets and demand changes. With shouts fired at her from every direction, Mrs. Steiner had enough. With a final warning against recklessly joining the demonstrators, she turned on her heel and walked out, slamming the door behind her. But she was not finished. In no time she returned with the district party representative, a heavysset woman seemingly confident in the authority of her office.

“Comrades! I come as the representative of the 5th District Party Committee to inform the Comrades about the Party’s standing on today’s demonstration. It has come to light that fascist provocateurs and agitators are among the

demonstrators and for that reason the Interior Ministry has revoked the permission to continue the march and ordered the crowd to disperse. Those who refuse will have to take the consequences. And to ensure that these fascist elements, when they begin to run, would not find refuge in nearby buildings such as this, we gave strict orders to your director to lock all the entrance doors.”

Her arrogant stance and smugly chosen words were like adding oil to fire. Shouting back that they were not little children to be ordered around, and that locked doors were intended to keep them inside, not to keep the “fascists” out, everyone, even the skeptics, turned away, and grabbing coats and purses headed for the exit. Sári was swept along with the rest, but once outside the building she stood hesitantly, not knowing what to do next. Then someone caught her by the arm, shouting, “Come on, you don’t want to miss a day like this!” With that she soon found herself standing in the midst of an ever-swelling crowd in Petofi Square, mostly students, waiting to start the march. Their intention was to go to the statue of Jozef Bem, a 19th century Polish general revered in Hungary as a symbolic figure of freedom for fighting on the side of Hungary during the 1848 revolt against the Habsburgs. The statue stood on the Buda side, where they were to lay a wreath as a tribute to the Polish people and to Gomulka for his brave action to expand freedom in Poland.