

*The Address of H.E. László Sólyom President of the Republic of Hungary
on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the 1956 Revolution and Freedom Fight*

*Budapest, State Opera House
22nd October 2006*

Your Majesties, Royal Highness, Presidents, Prime Ministers,
Speakers of Parliaments, Ministers and Ambassadors,
Distinguished Foreign Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen celebrating with us today,

Hungary and the World celebrate together the 50th anniversary of the 1956 Hungarian revolution and freedom fight. It is encouraging and elevating to feel that there is one event of commemoration with which everyone can identify. There are no differences of opinion, no reservations. Everyone pays tribute to the memory of the Hungarian heroes of 1956. Now, after 50 years, with a historic perspective, and after the fall of the Soviet communist regime we can clearly see the historic importance of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution and Freedom Fight.

But this is also an event when the world celebrates itself – and it has every reason to do so. We can re-experience together the former enthusiasm with which peoples took sides with the Hungarian revolution. The World now can celebrate its generous sacrifice: Austria, which had just been liberated, opened its borders for the 160,000 Hungarian refugees. The blood donations in Poland to help to rescue the wounded of the freedom fight, tens of thousands of Hungarian refugees found a new home in the various countries around the world.

But the real reason for this commemoration and joy is that this joint celebration is taking place in a Hungary that is independent, sovereign and democratic, where there is rule of law, and where the country could become a member of international organizations such as the European Union of its own free will. In the end, the objectives of the revolution have been realized. The fact that our historic course has taken this path has been influenced by the major role played

in it by the countries of the World, and Hungary itself. The communist world was not able to recover from the shock until the very end of its existence. And the honest thinkers did away with their illusion pertaining to the Soviet Union and the communist system.

It is to the credit of 1956 that the world looks upon Hungary with a positive mind. The heroic struggle of the Hungarian freedom fighters against Soviet predominance has earned Hungary recognition and appreciation everywhere up to the present day.

This favorable picture of the Hungarians was shaped by the reports of the revolution, especially those photographs and film recordings that were later circulated throughout the world, and which even today evoke poignant feelings. In maintaining this positive picture, the army of Hungarian refugees of 1956 dispersed throughout the world had a major role to play. They could neither forget nor avoid the issue of revolution. When they asked themselves what they were doing in Australia or Sweden, they always said: "We're here because of 1956". This is what they had to say to their children. They could hardly rely on written records or the research of historians. These were the people who took with themselves a fresh and direct experience, the spiritual impetus of those days, the prompt myth, and they have kept it alive up to the present day.

Those of us who were left behind and stayed at home found ourselves in a more difficult situation. Our '56 was not a set of snapshots of the revolution "frozen in time" to display the eternal, glorious moments.

Those of my generation, when we think of 1956, we think of our own lives. Our relationship to 1956 throughout the past 50 years cannot be separated from the revolution itself, neither when we carried the burden of the horrors of the retaliation, nor when we wanted to forget. Did we want to keep silent about it, or did we talk about it to our children? If someone did nothing more than just not mention the word "counter-revolution" in the context of 56, already preserved one of the most important messages of the revolution, namely, that we will never ever accept lies.

Every generation has to take count of what has happened to 1956 during the past 16 years of a free Hungary. The National Assembly in 1990, the first democratically elected Hungarian Parliament, at its first session declared 23rd October the National Day of this country. We celebrate it every year. Those who celebrate it “ex-officio” all declare themselves heirs to the legacy of 1956. However, the legacy of 1956 includes also the legacy of the subsequent 30 years, and also the clarification of the relationship between the change of regime and the revolution.

In 1989, the glory of 1956 shone up again, when the reburial of Imre Nagy and his fellow revolutionary martyrs reestablished justice. Many people felt that with this gesture they were finally able to rid themselves of the lies of the Kádár-regime.

The revolution in 1956 disrupted the legitimacy of the Rákosi-regime overnight, and the restoration of the fame and glory of 1956 in 1989 put an end to the legitimacy of the Kádár-regime. However, we must bear in mind that the new democratic system was not brought into being by revolution, but as a result of negotiations about a peaceful transition between opposition organizations and the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party, which crushed the 1956 revolution. I very vividly remember that during the Round Table Talks preparing the free elections and the new constitution, 1956 was mentioned in the context that we should never allow bloodshed in Hungary again. Indeed, the revolutionary changes in 1989 took place without violence. Of course, we can find certain parallels between 1956 and 1989. Such was the demand for the withdrawal of the Soviet troops at the reburial of Imre Nagy. Another parallel is the process of social decay prior to the change. In the preparation for the changes, the reform communist intelligentsia had a significant role to play.

But what is the real link between 1956 and 1989?

It is a fact that the major demands put forward in 1956 materialized in 1989/1990. Hungary now is a sovereign, independent country, free and democratic, with a rule of law. But the question is whether there was a direct way

here from the revolution? No, or if so, underground. For there were people all along who secretly commemorated 1956. And due respect should go to those who in the 1980s brought the memory of 1956 back into political thinking, and made it an important element in the process leading up to the change of regime.

A common feature of the 1956 revolution and the change of regime in 1989 is that considering their essence, both rejected party-state communism. There is no direct continuity between 56 and Kádár, and there is no direct continuity between Kádár and Hungary's new democratic state ruled by law, which was established in 1989/90. On the other hand, there is an essential continuity between the dictatorship before 1956 and what is commonly known as the "Kádár-regime" – even in the "mild" decades following the bloodstained years of retaliation. Faithfulness to the 1956 revolution and the legitimacy of our claims to it depend on whether we allow the line between our free Hungary today and the Hungary we had before 1989 to blur. The memory of 1956 cannot rest on two opposing and mutually exclusive traditions. Anyone who wishes to maintain continuity both with the revolution of 1956 and Kádár cannot celebrate with a clear conscience. They need to make a choice: select from the Kádarian past, and decide what they can associate themselves with, and what they dissociate themselves from. But that is exactly what the memory of 1956 cannot tolerate, because the basic question has always been: was it a revolution or a counterrevolution?

The parallel lesson of 1956 and 1989 is that in both cases, history surpassed the aspirations that wanted more freedom within a socialist system. The greatness of Imre Nagy lies in the fact that he recognized that. He stepped out of his communist past; he stepped out of the soviet world system. He remained a left-wing politician, and he undertook a historic role, he accepted the fate that the revolutionary Hungarian nation offered to him. And he would rather die than retreat.

Choosing and picking bits and pieces of the past became widespread after 1989. People are not only celebrating separately, but are celebrating different things.

The heirs of 1956 want their own pick, and everyone can find a tradition that suits them. A trendy slogan is that there are several 56s, and this makes the value and significance of 1956 relative.

I say there is only one 1956 revolution.

Of course, people experienced the events of the revolution in different ways. And indeed, the revolution was a most complex issue, like in a medieval mystery play where on the three levels of the stage different performances are taking place, three different stories, yet they all end up as one in the end. This is exactly how the revolution evolved – along several lines at the same time. The actors sometimes were not even aware of one another. In some other cases, they were seeking contact with each other. Incidental encounters, effects and counter-effects sometimes proved decisive. One story is of the demonstrating students who were joined by the masses. Another story is of the armed rebels, who in the eye of the world were the visualized manifestations of the 1956 revolution. There was a separate story of the role of the reform socialists, of the several governments, and yet another story of the path taken by Imre Nagy, or the reorganization of the coalition parties. The revolutionary committees and workers' councils emerged unexpectedly and had a wonderful role as they took control of running the country both in Budapest and in the countryside. Many of these workers' councils were able to operate as a parallel power even months after the revolution fell.

All that together constitutes what the 1956 revolution is about. István Dobi told Bibó in 1956 that “this Hungarian issue can be regarded through a great variety of glasses.” And Bibó answered that “it may be regarded through a great variety of glasses, but when you take them off, there remains only one way of seeing it.”

It would be inappropriate to project back into the past the various divergent interpretations and viewpoints that emerged later, or the lessons and/or justifications of one's own course of life. It would be even more inappropriate to project subsequent political intentions on how the contemporaries and the actual participants experienced the events. The abundance of historic facts, the

multitude of possible interpretations in themselves will not automatically help us make October 23rd a genuine national holiday. One can celebrate an event, one make it live and present, and relive those events only if it is one sweeping experience.

Historic evidence suggests that the basic experience of the revolution was a feeling of national unity and the joy over being free again. At the end of October 1956, we felt that the nation was together, the country was together again. And everybody felt free because at long last, they could openly and loudly tell the truth.

A whole nation agreed on the basic demands of the revolution: that Hungary's independence be restored; everyone wanted freedom rights, self-determination, and free elections instead of tyranny. Everything else, like social programs, and free decisions over the future path of the country could come only afterwards.

Under Hungarian law, October 23rd is a national holiday. But a real holiday is not made by the authorities. A national holiday is one that a nation accepts, and which is part of the memory of a nation, which has entered the myth of history, never to be changed, and thus becoming part of a national identity.

Such a day is March 15, 1848. One of the demands in October 1956 was to declare March 15th a national holiday again, a bank holiday. March 15th had been deeply rooted in our cells; the experience of 1848 helped us learn how to make a revolution. People started to draft their demands: in 16 points, in 20 points, they summarized what the Hungarian nation wanted. Then came the dissemination of the demands in the free press; the recital of Petőfi's "National Song". Many of the country's revolutionary sites followed this inherited pattern.

For more than a century, March 15th has always been remembered and celebrated by the nation basically in the same way. Petőfi will always recite his "National Song" on the stairs of the National Museum, and the crowd will always enthusiastically recite the chorus with him.

The question is: when will October 23rd become a similar day? Will it ever become one? We have almost everything at hand to ensure that this happens. Although we may miss some of the symbolic figureheads like Petőfi or Kossuth in 1848, we have the sacred scenes of 1956 – the Assembly Hall of the Technological University from where the demonstrating masses set out on October 23rd, and the statue of Jozef Bem, where the crowd arrived. The famous venues of the fights all stand as reminders of 56: Corvin köz, Kilián Barracks, Széna tér, the well-known slogans, and most important of all, the Hungarian flag with the hole in the middle.

We have original and authentic documentation of 56, which has also been preserved throughout the world. And we have among ourselves authentic witnesses, participants in the revolution and freedom fight. Many of them are here with us today in this Opera House.

Distinguished 56-ers,

During the past few days, the greatest experience for me has been the privilege of meeting you. If I am optimistic tonight, it is partly because of you, members of the organizations of the 56-ers with whom I celebrated together on Friday, and also because of what I have heard from those who established 50 years ago at the University of Szeged, the Alliance of University and College Students, which was the first organization to draft and disseminate the revolutionary demands. No one else was able to tell me so clearly and authentically how a crowd could become a community in a matter of seconds; that members were elected in the revolutionary committees and workers' councils on the basis of merit, decent human conduct and competence, and there was not the slightest sign of revenge. Only 56-ers were allowed to speak on behalf of their dead brethren in arms. The way they speak about how people raised their heads, how a nation found itself again makes us all understand the very essence of 1956. Being with them, I knew that I was not among people quarrelling over the inheritance, but among those who are leaving behind a precious legacy.

Practically, we have everything at hand to enable us to relive the essence of 56 on this day. October 23rd can become a genuine national day if we want it so, if we take steps that will lead us back to the unity of 56 and its real essence. That would be good for us, for the Hungarian nation. Should it not be possible now, let us trust the young people – let us be confident that they, along their own demands, ideals, spiritual needs, will find for yourself the 56 revolution. Let us be confident that we are going to see once again what happened to 1848 at the end of the 19th century, when finally, after two generations, the nation adopted March 15th and the freedom fight as their national day.

When we celebrate 1956, we must recall and celebrate the elementary and clear joy of being free again, which is what we felt then. This is what we can see in the historical photographs and films that show the faces of the demonstrators on 23rd October 1956. All witnesses who remember the events talk of these faces.

Let us hear Geza Ottlik: “No flight of fancy, no revolutionary fervour, nor genius can make those who were not there from the beginning to the end understand what it was like, just as there was no imagining beforehand the elation with which we walked the streets of Budapest, because there was no imagining that such elation was possible. [...] No man holds his miserable life – which has become possibly too miserable – dearer than the abstract notion of the glory of the nation. Let him see the faces, let him discover the relief and calm on these faces. [...] These eyes radiate not courage and resolve, not recklessness and daring, but the joy of relief, and this is all that counts! Alone or in groups, people are marching against the tanks, canons and machine guns with profound and joyful equanimity; for nothing is more precious to them than their newly regained human dignity.”

László Sólyom