

## **'It was never, never the Me that was pushed to the foreground, but always the Us'**

**Where the revolution began**

*An interview with Tamás Kiss*

*– As an introduction, please talk a little bit about your childhood.*

– One could get used to writing curriculum vitae in the last fifty years, unfortunately it had to be practised lots of times during the fifties. I was born in 1934 in Balatonederics, Transdanubia. It is a small village. Both of my parents were teachers, the whole teaching-staff consisted of the two of them. So I got through World War II as a teacher child. In 1945 I was admitted to the high school of Premonstrant monks in Keszthely. My father was a prisoner of war and was carried to the Soviet Union, my mother, me and my brother, who was eight years younger than I, stayed at home. My father came home at the end of 1948, but my poor mother died in 1952. I could not say we were starving but we had a really modest way of life. I graduated from high school in 1953, 'outstanding of maturity', I wanted to be an electrical engineer. But it was difficult to get in with an intellectual family background. I did not succeed, of course. So I spent the summer of 1953 at home, then I went to Budapest during the autumn and started to work in the Iron and Steelworks of Csepel as a sprayer, a semi-skilled worker. I stayed there for a year and got a decent salary but it was a damned hard job. Next year I tried to gain admission to the university again but I was rejected. I wrote an appeal. One had to go personally to the Ministry of Education with the appeal. Approximately 600 people stood there and then we were told that those who had finished high school with an outstanding certificate could stay, the rest had to go. So about 50 of us stayed there and I was told they would let me go to Szeged to the Faculty of Natural Sciences. So that is how I got to Szeged, on the line of mathematics and physics studies, which I did not really want in spite

of my mechanical interests. I did not get famous by taking the exams but I managed to finish the first and second semester, then I got acquainted with some law students. At the beginning of my second year, I visited the dean of the Faculty of Law and told him I wanted to get transferred to the Faculty of Law. We had a twenty-minute long conversation and eventually he told me: 'See you tomorrow morning.' Well, that is my story of becoming a law student. That was 1955. I got outstanding marks as a freshman. But I have to confess that the legal professions of that time, judge, prosecutor, did not even occur to me. I had two good friends, with whom I spent all of my time. One of them turned out to be a dean later, the other an academician and I also would have chosen a similar direction towards the sphere of science and not the practical fields of the legal profession. But then came the autumn of 1956, the date which changed my life entirely.

*– Did any kind of political idea have an effect on the way of your thinking?*

– I do not think it was a political idea, rather a kind of emotional affection, a series of adventures I previously mentioned: that I could not gain an admission to the university despite my outstanding high school certificate because my father and my mother were teachers, namely intellectuals. I saw that the so-called possessors of power, the workers and peasants may have lived in bigger poverty, under a tighter suppression. And it is not poverty, since after the war it was almost natural, the poor conditions of living. But how much they were terrorized! Ringer-freak – you may have heard about it. I saw it when SPA [State Protection Authority] officials grilled my father at night because of some political debate circle. Nothing more, so they did not do anything. But it was a conspiracy. Fortunately, he got away with it, his name was mentioned but he was not in focus. One could hear rumours about which no one talked, rather kept them. It determined a certain attitude that changes were necessary but a push from the outside was needed. One could know the barriers are so hard, so tough that if I do not want to get my head cracked, do not want to be imprisoned, then I shut my mouth.

*– Did the students have any kind of autonomy or a representing organisation initiated by them, or AHUCS was a completely spontaneous movement?*

– The university students had no autonomous organisation, there was only, exclusively AWY from 1948 as a youth alliance and it was mandatory for everybody. The life within AWY was that the AWY secretary said a platitude or read a brochure up or something from Szabad Nép every month.

*– Could you feel any kind of stirring among the students and teachers when you went back to Szeged on the autumn of 1956?*

– There was a kind of effervescence. A year earlier it would never have happened that students had a conversation in a corner or in a room of a Youth Hostel and talked about political matters. It was a taboo. Nobody dared to risk it, to express an own opinion. You could definitely feel in September 1956 that a change was going on. Something was going to happen, something was happening around us. You could feel it very well. The fermentation had started.

*– Let us turn back to the events of October, after the enlisting. The first spontaneous gathering was on 16 October. What were the direct preliminaries?*

– I have already mentioned that when we came back to Szeged, the atmosphere infected us. András Lejtényi showed me a typed sheet of paper around 10 October, one of his friends had sent it in a letter from Budapest, that's what he said. They demanded the facultative education of Russian language and said that if their wish was not going to be fulfilled, they would not attend the lessons. This sheet was passed from hand to hand secretly: 'Look what I got, read it!' But I stress it again, these were only small groups of two people. I showed it to my best friend, but I did not hang it on the wall. That was the atmosphere. Then, talking with András Lejtényi about the appeal, about the boycott of Russian language, it dawned on us: 'Hey man, there is not only Russian language, there is martial education, there

is...’ So I stress it again, first these welfare, social problems came, like the recent student problems, no takeover, no organisation, nothing like that. It depends on the individual character of a person what kind of solution he/she looks for.

With our idea of establishing an organisation we went to Imre Tóth, who was a second year student, then we visited János Aszalós. The next three or four days passed by telling it to five or six people but the idea of creating an organisation, demanding this, demanding that spreaded like an avalanche. One of the birthplaces of the idea was the student club on 14 and 15 of October on the left of the central building. We spent the days there. We had lunch there at noon and the rooms were opened together throughout the afternoon. We could have a chat there but there was not a bar, we could not buy alcohol. So this student club turned out to be our headquarters. The first meeting was on 16 October. My would-be mates in accusation, Imre Tóth, Dezső Göncöl etc. and I do not recall as an event organised by us. I tell you later why. There are some who state (now, thirty years later) that they were the organizers they made the note ‘Student general assembly will be held in Aud. Max.’. As I know and even the testimonies made in 1957 and 1958 prove it that the university AWY committee and party committee of that time remained silent because... and here I have to stop for a while.

There were two or three rats at every faculty. The university AWY and party committees were informed about everything within thirty minutes. So it was not a secret at all that the Faculties of Law and Arts are preparing. We had friends from the Faculty of Arts who turned up regularly in the student club. The Faculty of Medicine was the other side at that time, we did not get on well with each other. So the students of these two faculties scattered the news. Then the comrades decided to set up a meeting for the students, where they wanted to explain the political situation. It was a typical trick. Somebody stands up and begins to speak. Here I have to jump over a few days in the story. We held the second general assembly on 20 October and as a reaction, the ministry ordered every university to fix up gatherings

where the party and AWY leaders of these universities had to explain the political situation to the students. So these meetings of 22<sup>nd</sup> of October (Monday) in Gödöllő, Sopron, Debrecen and in the other cities of the countryside and at the University of Technology were initiated by them. They set them up, they stood on the podium: AWY secretaries, the party secretary, the Chancellor etc. and cut short every contradiction. That is another story that later students started to take the floor and the plan coagulated into the well-known series of events.

So, going back in time, I am sure the meeting was announced by the AWY committee and what is more, the AWY leaders came to see us in the morning of 16 October. They wanted to talk to us: 'Do it within the framework of AWY! Tell us, what do you want?' They tried to take the wind out of our sails. And then we did not answer but left them alone. Good, there will be a general assembly, we will go there and see what they want to talk about. Imre Tóth and I remembered the same: when we went into the hall, it was full and nobody sat on the podium. The order was that the leaders took their seats there. Then we went up there and said 'Mates, tell us your ideas', and we started to unfold our initiative of establishing a student organisation, what kind of structure we had imagined, how it should be created. We sketched it and told what we would demand beyond the facultative education of Russian language, in connection with the syllabus, the living standard of students etc. Later it was uncovered that the AWY leaders had already been there when we arrived but did not come out. They were frightened. I do not know why, they should be asked because they have not said anything about it yet. The 16<sup>th</sup>, this was the first time when we told our opinion not only to a small group of people, not only to our friends. I conducted the assembly, I gave the right of speaking to everyone. You are next, then you... During those three hours (but I do not know exactly how long it was) the tension of the meeting rose from 25-30% to 99-100%. We did not argue about the character of the organisation. O.K., we will formulate the rules and regulations etc. I think the moment they accepted the establishment of AHUCS, we announced the date of the next assembly: 20 October. Then we would

state what we wanted point by point and what is more, we came to an agreement there that everybody would go back to their faculty after the end of the meeting and would set up a gathering at the faculty to elect three members into the so-called leading board! We were not elected by anybody, not by God either, we just simply went up to the podium. After the balloting of the leading board members, the committee of 18 would come into being, they could formulate the rules and regulations on 18 and 19 October for the upcoming general assembly.

But let me have a look at the first meeting again... Suddenly someone stood up and said that as things went we should have demanded this and that... And then came politics. The next speaker added another demand. I cannot recall their names but one, Tivadar Putnik from the Faculty of Arts, who had been rehabilitated and could reenter the university that autumn. As he was from Yugoslavia he may have been sentenced at the end of the 40s. He was 4 or 5 years older than us. He had a tough contribution, for example, he demanded the withdrawal of the Soviet troops. You can understand that he was a suitable person to claim these demands emotionally. And then, I remember clearly, I waved him down, I closed the constituent assembly of AHUCS and said, 'now this is a political mass meeting, say what you want!' I did so because a moment earlier it came into my mind that we were going to be in such a trouble we would not get away with! And I thought that if I had been a conducting president of that – I had not even realised the danger an hour earlier – I would be considered responsible. But if it was a mass meeting that was another matter. I, as a law student, considered it as serious to be a passive participant and not a conductor, leader, organiser. So we turned into a mass meeting and there came the more and more daring demands. At the end we declared that the leaders should be elected and we would meet again in the student club on 19 October. This was a noisy evening, no need to mention. Although only a few of us stayed together (Lejtényi, Gönczöl, Imre Tóth, some others and me) and went to a youth hostel. We formulated an appeal titled 'Join us!' to

every student of the country on a small typewriter. Then we declared that we had established AHUCS in Szeged. Everybody in the country can join! This appeal got to other student friends by mail. I do not know exactly who received it, but four days later we got several greetings.

*– Did the leaders of the university and AWY want to see you between the 16 and 20 October?*

– As it turned out later (and we knew nothing about it, of course) they had squeakers everywhere, a whole network. By the end of the day of 16<sup>th</sup>, the party committee had already been informed. There is a big trouble here, comrades, the university youth has revolted, they demand the withdrawal of the Soviet troops, they demand elections, the abandonment of Rákosi and his mates and they also have educational claims! Something must be done! Then the AWY committee was ordered to keep a session and now it seems to me they did not feel strong enough to simply break us down, they rather said: Right, let us find those ten students, they at least must be fired and may be sentenced for incitement and get a two-year imprisonment! They were not strong enough. So they appointed the university AWY committee to get in touch with the leaders and try to persuade them to stay within AWY and then AWY would overtake these problems. They would have overtaken those they could have. It is obvious that those radical demands we – and I have to stress the we because not I or he or she found them out but we – had formulated would not be accepted by them. And on the 17<sup>th</sup> of October, as I can remember we held the faculty assemblies. I can talk only about the Law Faculty events. Perbíró let us hold a law faculty assembly. We did not ask permission for the 16<sup>th</sup>, as that one wasn't organised by us. And what is more, the news of that assembly reached Pest and got to the Secretary of Education of that time, to Albert Kónya and he came down on the 17<sup>th</sup> of October to Szeged to see what was going on. He visited the Faculty of Law because he had been told that first of all we, law students had bustled and not the Faculty of Medicine,

Pharmacology and Natural Sciences. We were very surprised when Kónya did not say that we were, all of us were fired, he said: 'Boys and girls, forget this silly thing.' He said he agreed with the claims concerning the study demands and he did not even mention he did not agree with a new organisation, with the establishment of a new university organisation. Certainly, we did not start with 'Dear secretary, and what about the withdrawal of the Soviet troops?' We did not say that. So Kónya did not forbid anything, that is why the university leaders, the vice-dean, the Chancellor did not forbid it, however, they started to promote us. The assembly of the Faculty of Law, the 400-500 students balloted three law students into the committee of 18: Imre Tóth, Attila Fodor and me. András Lejtényi, who came up with the idea the previous day was not elected into this committee. András was not an easy character, he gave the cold shoulder a bit who he did not like, he was not that kind of favourite of the public. I liked him very much, he was a really good friend of mine, but those who did not know him properly could reject him. So he was not elected and everybody accepted it that he was no more an official member of the committee of 18. Yet, he went on working with us. That was a real evidence of the democratic character of the movement: that one of its initiators was not elected. Because they did not really like him! I was elected because I was somehow more appealing. And Imre Tóth too. But Attila did nothing. He was there but then he actually did not play a role in it.

We had a meeting in the student club the next day. We informed each other who had been elected from the Faculty of Natural Sciences, of Arts, of Medicine, of Pharmacology and from the College of Pedagogical Studies. Then the leaders of AWY sent us a message, in which they offered a meeting and negotiations. They had an office somewhere near the student club, and the AWY leaders were sitting there around a long table and we sat down at the other end of it, may be a dozen out of the 18. Formally, we had not come into being yet, it could not happen without a permission but we considered it to be established and that was enough. We actually spent two days with



arguing about staying within AWY and not setting up an own organisation because we were still all AWY members and what is more, there were several AWY group leaders among us, though they were not upper leaders. So they advised us to stay within AWY and demand those rights within its framework. But the decisive majority of the committee of 18 and basically me, András and Tóth as well, said we had nothing to do with AWY, we were fed up with them, they had lied to us, they had fooled us too many times! We do it alone. Beyond this two-day meeting, the committee of 18 (and Lejtényi) formulated the plan of the rules and regulations and we talked every item over. It was very important that the ideas heard on 16 October were summarised into about 20 points. We also found out that we should invite Imre Nagy. He was the Big Man of the period, the name on the flag. Two deputies, Imre Tóth and another person travelled to Budapest. They went to Őrsi Street but they could only talk with his wife. She said he was not at home and advised them to come back the following day and she added that probably he could not accept the invitation. They could not meet Imre Nagy the following day either. As I see it now, he would not have undertaken a speech at the general assembly because it is well known now that they hardly could persuade him to take part even in the events of 23<sup>rd</sup> of October. So it was characteristic that we would have liked to hear Imre Nagy.

Two other aspects had to be taken into consideration. The first was that study demands possibly had to include all students. We tried to keep the general claims from the mass of ideas. We decided to keep all political demands but one, namely the withdrawal of the Soviet troops. It was mentioned on 16<sup>th</sup> of October and we said we took the responsibility for not putting it forward. Then we would see what would happen. We decided that Dezső Gönczöl would tell the introductory speech. We asked Professor Perbíró to be the conducting president.

And during these two days many of my friends warned me: 'You are going to get in big trouble, you will be canned!' I said to myself: if I had started to do this, if I had started to toll the bell, I had to go on,

no doubt about it! I turned to be a bit fatalist I let things happen. To understand why I became a kind of fatalist then, I tell you that I went to the dean and told him, 'Please come to our general assembly on the 20<sup>th</sup> of October, sir, and conduct it as a president!' And he did not send me the hell out of there, but said, 'Boys, that is a great honour, I will certainly be there!' Then we invited the Chancellor and he said, 'Certainly I will be there!' Excuse me, if they, the dean and the Chancellor reassert me that I am on the right way and do not warn me to quit, then I would go on even if there was a hint at the back of my mind that something would go wrong. After two days of debate, we could not come to an agreement and I have to add that even Róbert Bohó, the deputy of Petőfi Circle came down from Budapest and we said to him as well, 'Robi, this is impossible, we will have nothing in common'. He answered at least we had to come to Budapest and have negotiations with Gábor Tánczos and his mates. We accepted his proposal, we would travel there after the general assembly. So we were willing to negotiate but not to surrender. We were waiting for the general assembly of 20<sup>th</sup> of October.

*– What is the explanation to the attitude of the university leaders? Would they have had a completely different reaction a year earlier to the same kind of activity?*

– Subsequently I think the news of the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress in the spring of 1956 generated the same kind of feelings not only in Szeged, but also in the villages, in the whole country, people were expecting something. They felt something had to happen. Those who were old enough to have proper political experience were decent and honest and saw it was really the will of the masses, the nation and simple people. It was not the dirty business of three people; they could not do else but identify themselves with it emotionally. It was clear they thought it was good if something was to be changed. Certainly, they did not think they would go and destroy the city or resort to arms and go against the Russian tanks, nothing like that. They agreed with us and somehow backed up our movement.

– *Then came the day of the general assembly...*

– On the day of 20<sup>th</sup> of October the hall was full, of course, the mass could hardly get in, there were people everywhere, in the windowpanes, in the doors, on the stairs... Délmagyarország had already published a short declaration, perhaps on the 18<sup>th</sup> of October, just really modestly. But the Hungarian Radio was there to make a report. That is O.K., do it! The Auditorium Maximum was completely full. The corridor was full and people were standing even in front of the building and the guys amplified the speakers' voice. A witness told me later that when we had been chewing a point of the rules and regulations for one and a half hour, the people outside started to get fed up with it because they were waiting for the demands to be announced. So the crowd was not really interested in the organisation and the rules and regulations but 'When do we hear it from someone loudly?' They were waiting for demands.

At the beginning of the general assembly, Perbíró opened it and said his greetings. Lots of teachers were there, the chancellor, the dean, professors. They sat in the first rows. Lejtényi, Gönczöl and I sat on the podium. And then began the two-hour long debate over the rules and regulations, we had to vote point by point and at the end the whole pack again – certainly it had to be a clear, lawful work. In the meantime it turned out there were some delegates in the crowd from other towns, maybe two, and we received greeting telegrams and we read them up. (Probably our appeal written on 17 October and delivered on the same day arrived in time and we got the answer two days later. That was a quick return, especially those days; it would be quick even today. And it gave new momentum to us.) And then I read the demands.

The study demands were not so significant. Nobody added anything to them. But then the political claims! As the previously formulated points became more and more radical, the applause and invigoration of the crowd became more and more massive as well. They clapped their hands when heard, 'Imre Nagy and György Lukács should be elected into the Central Leading Board.' When we

demanded free, democratic elections, they exploded. As I said the committee of 18 previously had decided not to include the withdrawal of the Soviet troops.

I finished the points. Then what happened? Perhaps the first contributor came up with the idea of 15<sup>th</sup> of March, with the restoration of its national feast status. We had forgotten to mention it, that is the truth, I personally felt sorry about it. The next speaker started solidly, 'I am György Halász, medical student, fourth grade, I think there are tens of thousands of Soviet people who live here, they should be sent home...' Another explosion! Then the conducting president, Professor Perbíró (he was a decent man, I liked and honoured him very much) realised, that was the point when it was out of hand. The power would swallow some demands which had no chance to be realised but the withdrawal of Soviet troops, of Soviet comrades? That meant revolution! So Professor Perbíró tried to calm the assembly down and said that provocative demands should not be promoted because these demands would sink the ship of the alliance. But the crowd could not be calmed down. And at the end we did not leave it out. We thought it happened, 'Darn it, it will be included.'

The next edition of *Délmagyarország*, in which our claims were published, left this demand out. They published the points and the 15<sup>th</sup> of March. On 21 October we sent envoys to Debrecen, Miskolc and Pécs with the rules and regulations and the demands and the withdrawal of the Soviet troops was included. It is understandable why the journalist of *Délmagyarország* did not dare to write down the withdrawal of the Soviet troops on 21 October 1956.

Despite all warnings, the demand of the withdrawal was included and after the general assembly, we went up into the room of the chancellor. He said he would secure the vital technical background needed for the operation. We came to an agreement there that Abrudbányi and Ács would go to Pécs and others to Miskolc, Debrecen and perhaps to Veszprém and Lejtényi and I would go to Budapest. It was possible because the envoy of the Petőfi Circle had persuaded us to have a conversation with the leaders of the Petőfi

Circle. And he said then he would carry us to Budapest. So during the night of 20<sup>th</sup> of October we went to Budapest with the car of the Circle and they placed us in the Youth Hostel of the University of Economics to take a rest before meeting them.

I have already mentioned that beyond the appeals we sent delegates to every university centre on 21 October, including me. We carried the rules and regulations and the points of demands and as a result of the events of Szeged, the ministry ordered the party and AWY committees in every university centre to hold student meetings where they had to 'enlight' the students concerning the given political situation. So these meetings started in the presence of either our delegates or our appeals and documents and revealed facts prove it that all of these officially fixed up meetings turned into an AHUCS assembly within thirty minutes. Sopron, Pécs and the University of Technology joined us and established their own AHUCS bodies. This meant voting, they seceded from AWY and joined AHUCS. They elected their leaders by public acclamation and what is even more important, they formulated nearly the same political demands in Sopron, Pécs, Veszprém etc. on 22 October as we did two days earlier. There were only some slight differences and paraphrasing.

On 21 October we met Gábor Tánczos, András Hegedűs B. and some other leaders of the Petőfi Circle. They immediately advised us to quit and let these problems be solved within the framework of AWY. We answered (Lejtényi and me) that it could not happen, we did not want it and we had no right to make decisions in that matter. So we evaded it and it was interesting that by the end of the meeting Gábor Tánczos may have admitted that we may have been right. It was clear that Petőfi Circle did not even think about changing of the social system, they just wanted to repair it as an intellectual wing of the party. Our demands were much more radical, they meant a complete turn. They could only answer that we may have been right. On the other hand, we did not even have to seek where to go because the news of the delegates of Szeged reached the people and several people visited us from different faculties and invited us to different meetings

and asked us to tell our story, what had happened in Szeged. We visited the University of Economics, the University of Agriculture in Gödöllő and the University of Technology, we were at the famous assembly of 22 October.

This last assembly was typical. Six-seven unknown university students kind of 'kidnapped' us and we went to the University of Technology by tram. It was already in the evening: we went through dark corridors and we entered the great hall from the back. The assembly had already begun. One of the students simply stepped to the microphone, 'He is the delegate from Szeged, let him take the floor!' The authority answered, 'No, he cannot, there is no need for his speech!' 'No, let us hear him, come on, come on'... I was a bit confused by the unknown environment and I told them what we had done in Szeged, I talked about the organisation and read up the demands. That is why we were there. I cannot recall this event in details because after my arrest I tried to forget those things which I supposed the authority was not aware of. They did not know about this event because I was not even introduced. The guys did not know me either. The fellow student from Szeged could have been anybody. So I tried to conceal that I took the floor at several assemblies, but after the change of regime, when some old revolutionists came together, they told me they remembered me, I had stood beside a column. I swear I cannot remember.

Until then the party and the AWY secretary let off hot air and the audience got more and more anxious hearing the loads of stupidity. We just gave way to the flood, I mean we just dug a hole in the dam and the tide washed it away. Our speeches definitely had a heating effect at these university meetings. As far as I know, the same happened in Pécs. There was a periodical, *Hétfői Hírlap*. It came out on every Monday. The editor of the journal visited our general assembly on 20 October and wrote a really evocative, stirring article. He did not demand the withdrawal of the Soviet troops but exactly reflected the atmosphere. It was surely read at every university because the university youth of that time was really keen on reading

newspapers. That was another reason why all universities chose the way of secession from AWY on 22 October and undertook the political demands as well. What is more, the political demands came to the front by then and the study claims got less and less emphasis.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> of October Lejtényi and I were invited to the Central Committee of AWY. As it turned out, the secretary of the Central Committee was in Szeged on 20 October, but in secret. They were trying to persuade us. They asked us to approve of organising university elections again, this time secret elections. No nominations by the AWY or the party committees. And the elected deputies would come together in Budapest and would make a decision about the future direction. We answered that would be a passable way because if the deputies were not appointed but elected to the meeting in Budapest it would secure the realisation of our expectations. The intention was to direct the movement towards a more legal path. It can be felt it was more like a arousal, according to the present principles.

The students of the universities joined us unanimously. It was a kind of public will: yes, we all want it. The name of the new organisation, AHUCS, definitely had an impact as a slogan. After eight years it was the first youth organisation established not by the power (AWY, Petőfi Circle and Attila József Circle were all their creations) but a spontaneous thing coming from under, it was our idea and achievement.

Then it was 23 October. We were still in Budapest and I gave Imre Tóth a call, I invited him to Budapest because the two of us could not cope with the invitations, everybody wanted to hear the guys from Szeged. We agreed that we would meet that day and later we did. When we heard about the demonstration, we went there but then Lejtényi and I were alone. We hardly knew anybody in Budapest. Attention turned away from us towards the demonstration. The name of AHUCS disappeared from the flags. We were a little bit lucky because Petőfi Circle tried to moderate the atmosphere again and they came on a truck with speakers on it and they offered slogans: 'Warsaw', 'Polish friendship', 'Democracy', 'Imre Nagy back to

leadership', and they avoided the demand of the withdrawal of the Soviet troops. We noticed András Hegedűs B. on the truck who we met the previous day. We got on the truck and went to the demonstration with the truck for a while. Maybe that is why one of the AWY leaders university from Szeged could testify, during the investigations in 1957, that it was Tamás Kiss who screwed up the crowd with slogans on that demonstration. Certainly, I was far from it...

We took part in the demonstration, we went to Bem Square, Kossuth Square, to the Radio. We could not reach the gate, we got stuck in Múzeum-garden in the crowd at about eight or nine p.m. while things had already got loose: firing, tanks, overturned trams. The crowd stayed together until around midnight. I was only with Imre Tóth, we somehow lost Lejtényi by then. I went to the meeting point that Imre Tóth had told me on the phone previously. So I left Lejtényi alone at about eight p.m. In the meantime I lost András Lejtényi and I have never ever seen him again. He is said to have come back to Szeged once more but we did not meet then. So I stayed in the company of Imre Tóth. During the night, we went back to the dormitory we were staying at. Some days passed there, we could not get back to Szeged. In the meantime, university they started to set up the University National Guard. We became the members of the National Guard and got guns.

Another two or three days passed. Then we decided to go back to Szeged, we felt we had nothing to do in Budapest. We went to Baja on a truck, then to Szeged. We joined the National Guard again, Imre Tóth and me. We stayed at the barracks of Öthalom. Previously it had belonged to the SPA but they had already disappeared so we only had to defend it from thefts, there were guns and packs left there. It could happen because Professor József Perbíró, who had been elected the president of Revolution Committee in Szeged on 26<sup>th</sup> of October, asked his colleague, Barna Lazúr, who was a lecturer at the Department of Military Studies as a lieutenant, to be the commander of the National Guard. Barna Lazúr found it natural to set up a university battalion from volunteers (beyond the worker, intellectual



and citizen members): if you want to join the National Guard, come here, you get an identity card, a automatic rifle, ammunition and a job to do. But if you have a duty, you must do what your commander tells you. They did it so. As I can remember, 150-200 students joined the battalion and a small unit – including me – was sent to Öthalom. About twenty guys. We stayed there until the fourth or fifth of November.

– *What was your duty?*

– The National Guard was set up to maintain order. We did not get involved in the armed combat because when it was officially confirmed that the Russian troops had attacked Budapest, Barna Lazúr ordered every guard unit to surrender.

– *How did you surrender?*

– There were huge concrete rings in Marx Square because of a construction. When I and Imre Tóth came back to the city centre in the middle of the night, we put the guns into these concrete rings. Imre had a machine gun and I had the automatic rifle. I remember very well, because the police officers troubled me with this so much that it got into my mind for ever. I have no idea what happened to the guns.

– *When was the surrender?*

– On 5 November. But I did not count the days. I think it was around dawn on 5 November. Budapest was attacked on the fourth, they came to Szeged during the night of the fifth. So during the afternoon of the fourth Lazúr sent everybody home and we left the barracks during the night. Everybody took care of their guns somehow. Some of us hid it well, we did not.

– *Then events took a turn again and accelerated. How did you feel after 5 November? The life at the university was far from starting again...*

– There was a school break, most of the university students travelled home, they did not even come back on 4 November. I had no intention of going home, partly because Balatonederics was a bit far

from Szeged and partly because I played a role in the events until the end, but very few people stayed there, maybe ten percent of the students.

After 4 November, apathy settled on us for about two weeks. Baróti secured a place somewhere for us to run the office of AHUCS. So we had a small room we called AHUCS office, a table, some chairs and perhaps a telephone. We got together there every day, we did not scatter. But there was no point in it. What would be next? We just hung around. Then the idea of making flyers as a form of political opposition cropped up. But I was the ringleader, I just helped to make them. We dispensed and scattered the flyers. I do not know how many we made between the middle of November the middle of December; the police were better informed. We made about 30-40 kinds of flyers and several hundred copies of each kind against Kádár and his company. Definitely against them, but without any kind of result. Then it was Christmas. O.K. guys, let us go home! Education was still broken. I went home around 20 December.

Sometime around the middle of January I got news about the restart of university education. I came back to Szeged. I stayed in my sublet and in Eötvös Youth Hostel. During the previous fall, Eötvös Youth Hostel had come into being, where the best students could get in. I was one from the Faculty of Law. But that only meant I lived there. So I stayed at Eötvös Youth Hostel for a while, then – as it is said – it started to get too hot for me, arrests began. My landlady was waiting for me when I went out to my sublet and said, 'Tamás, for God's sake, eight or ten paramilitary men [men in quilted jackets] were here last night and they rummaged your room, they wanted to arrest you!' I caught a train and left Szeged. I hid in different places in Transdanubia. First I decided to leave the country, but I turned back near from the border. My emotions defeated me. I think I made the right decision. I stayed at relatives, acquaintances. A long time passed until the end of April, full of insecurity whether events would turn. I got a message as well. Surely, it was all planned, it came from the university to the address of my parents and it was about a disciplinary

trial. Then I came back to Szeged on 28 April. I entered the Faculty of Law the next day, around 9 a.m. I had a chat with some people there and it turned out there would be no disciplinary procedure. As I left the building, two detectives, about six-eight meters from the horseman statue, approached me and asked, 'Are you Tamás Kiss?' I said, 'Yes.' 'Then follow us unobtrusively!' They declared I was under arrest. Later it turned out, I had been wanted for several months when they caught me. They were waiting for me to turn up in Szeged. As I mentioned earlier, there were squeakers everywhere, they were informed immediately, here is Tamás Kiss, that is him, you can catch him now! Otherwise they could not have caught me, they did not know my face, my outlook. So they arrested me and my eight-month long detention on remand began. I was questioned for hours on every or every second day, 'What have you committed against our socialism?' Our trial began at Csongrád County Court in January 1958. Besides me, Imre Tóth, law student, and Dezső Gönczöl, college student, were accused of establishing and organising AHUCS. András Lejtényi had disappeared, he had left the country.

The other students in my case, called Tamás Kiss and his mates-case, were found guilty in dispensing flysheets and hiding guns. The trial took a month, the sentences were tough: ten, eight, six years. We did not find them so serious. Somehow we got a clear picture about the sentences in the prison... one could get five years for such pitiful actions as writing flysheets! So we felt relieved when the judge declared the sentence of foreseeable duration. Then we entered the jail of Szeged, Csillag and later we were in Vác. Under the appellation in 1959, our sentences were reduced to five years – it was strange that a wave of ease rushed through the country in that year.

– *What was the original judgement?*

– Eight years. Imre Tóth, whose case was called 'violating state secrets', got ten years which was later reduced to six. One year more than I got.

– *What did 'violating state secrets' mean?*

– It meant that a friend of Imre, a student of the University of Technology, had joined the national guard in Budapest, watched a SPA building similar to the one here in Szeged. He found a book there or something, a list of squeakers, a whole network. Was it an existing network or not, it never turned out because probably it consisted of fake identities. But he took the list, brought it down to Szeged and showed it to Imre, they tried to identify them. They had only hints. This was in December. They really called the attention of the police on themselves so they were arrested pretty soon, in February. That is why he got more years... An amnesty was announced and I left the prison of Vác after spending three years and some month in prison from the five-year sentence.

– *When did you get out of jail exactly?*

– 1<sup>st</sup> of April, 1960.

– *And what could you do then?*

– That is another story, a somewhat softer one. We, young guys lived under easier conditions in the jail – and there were lots of youngsters there. We had no wives, we had no children. We had parents and we felt sorry for them but we thought we could survive that period of our lives. On the other hand, there were men who had to leave their families, children and wives and nobody looked after them. Prison did not break us as hard. The detention on remand was tougher because we lived in insecurity.

It was natural that one went home after getting out of jail. After a while I went to Győr to work in the wagon factory as a crane repairing unskilled worker then I went to Budapest a year later. One tried to get more distant from home where no one knew you and a certificate of good behaviour was not necessary, there were no questions.

I worked in the machine-tool factory in Budapest. In the meantime, I got acquainted with my wife who lived in Balassagyarmat so I moved there. I continued to do unskilled labour for two more years while I was attending the school of economics. I finished as a skilled bookkeeper, designer and statistician. I got a job at a small company

as a bookkeeper; I spent ten years there. Then I sent in a petition in which I asked whether I could go on with my university studies. Fortunately, I was approved in 1970. I attended the correspondence course of Loránd Eötvös University. Certainly, I had to work, we had three children. I took a degree as cum laude in 1975 and started to work as a lawyer in a co-operative farm. It was clear that I could not move on or improve my position, the people of my sort were just tolerated. We started to raise our head in 1989. We held meetings, more and more of us came together. The old prison mates had had contact with each other for a long time before: it was a strange characteristic feature of the past three decades that one could keep in touch only with the old prison mates. Partly because you could only rely on them, and partly because you did not want to land anybody in a mess with your 'counter-revolutionist' status. It is true that you got the certificate of good character after 15 years, but observation went on until 1990. They knew everything, all of us were bugged and observed, who you showed up with, who were your friends, what you did. Obviously all of our prison mates decided to stay in the shadow, to remain passive politically.

In 1990, we moved a bit more. In the summer of 1990 some soulful, young citizens of Balassagyarmat asked me to undertake a position in the self-government. I tried to step back saying, 'Listen guys, I have four years left till pension.' 'But you have to play a role in it!' Then I said, 'Darn it. If an old revolutionist does not try it, all is busted!' So I was elected to be a deputy mayor and I did it with real pleasure. It was really a nice task, I really gained the respect of the public when I became a pensioner and my mandate ended in 1994. I was sixty years old then. I enjoyed the days of pension. But in 1996 I was seduced again: my friends from Budapest asked me to take a job in the office of the prime secretary. I was a chief government counsellor between 1996 and 1999. My duty was to co-ordinate the organisations of the revolutionists of 1956, and to organise celebrations. As a 'chief 1956 person' I was accepted as a man of their sort although this is a very sensitive company, full of 60-70-80-year-

old people. I had no problems and I am very proud of that. First, because the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary passed off quite peacefully, without flying at each other's throats and second because the memorial called Flame of Revolution standing on Kossuth Square is my achievement, I gathered the money for it from the mayors of the districts and from other places. And another thing, which is less-known, that we placed a memorial stone in Snagov where Imre Nagy and his mates were imprisoned. The president of the republic also took part in the investiture and we invited the survivors of Snagov as well. It was really a kind, but hard job and last summer I decided to quit. Now I only undertake passions.

*– Did they ever try to rope you in either during the prison years or the detention on remand?*

– They never tried me, but many of my friends told me about such things. They withstood by saying, 'Sorry, I am an ill person.' They copped out. They tried many of us. I avoided it because I got out of sight, I guess. I intentionally did not live in Szeged or in Balatonederics for three decades. They surely would have come to me as well. Some members of the authority knew about my previous role in the revolution but it was not a widespread fact. They never tried to rope me in.

I had only one affair with the police around the end of the 70s or the beginning of the 80s. By then you could claim a western passport. So I applied for the passport. They rejected me officially on the basis of sending in unreal data. I wrote that I had never been sentenced. That was another thing, who could get passports. I thought I would not let them call me a liar and I had already been a lawyer at that time. So I wrote an appeal explaining that I was qualified to have a clean record according to the given section of the given law. Two weeks passed then suddenly a grim detective entered my office. He did not introduce himself. 'Withdraw your appeal!' 'I am sorry, but this is the law. I do not withdraw it. Am I right or not?' He left angrily after my answer. Some weeks later I got the letter from the higher forum, from

the National Central Police Station: 'I do not allow you to travel abroad because it violates the interests of the People's Republic of Hungary.' I couldn't do anything. They had the right to decide it. That was my only affair with the police in thirty years.

*– What kind of memories and documents have remained about the significant participants of assemblies either on the 16<sup>th</sup> or the 20<sup>th</sup> of October?*

– The first assembly remained unnoticed, there are no documents about it, but I saw somewhere a hand-written bill that 'we call you to an assembly held on 16<sup>th</sup> of October'. Nothing else. As far as the second assembly is concerned, a record of the Radio has survived. It has fairly good quality, some parts cannot be understood but both the atmosphere and the words can be caught. Though the introductory speech of Dezső Gönczöl is missing from the tape but Perbíró can already be heard. There are photos. Beyond these, there are only police and court files in the Csongrád County Archives, they consist of the testimonies of the retaliated persons and university students considered to be eyewitnesses, recorded during the process.

When I was arrested on the first or second of May 1957 and the questionings started, it was absolutely clear that they would ask me, 'what did you do from September to November?' And I could not answer that I was at home in the company of my parents. Hundreds, thousands of people knew I was there, said this, said that. Except from some hardly-known things that happened in a very small company, very few things, I did tell the story of us. I knew well then what had happened, so what Imre Tóth said to them coincided with my testimony, what Dezső Gönczöl said to them, no contradictions, black and white, every minute could be retraced, at most we could not recall names. The ones about whom we supposed the investigators did not know, I still cannot recall because then I wanted to forget them. The events of that period can be retraced minute by minute from the police and court files.

The events between 23<sup>rd</sup> of October and 4<sup>th</sup> of November should be regarded differently because the role of the students was not as

significant in them. There are no documents – or at least I do not know about their existence – about that period. It would be almost a hopeless work to uncover for example a speech of a student at a revolution committee session, or what kind of meetings were held at the universities. There are survivors who can recall these events, they can be retraced but as I see it (and I think I have the right to say that), these reminiscences must be handled with a seriously critical attitude because one can be capable of recalling what one only had heard forty years ago without being there. My companions in distress can also produce such mistakes and I myself often have had to face the same problem in the last ten years since I started doing research in the matter – to uncover old things which I cannot remember but facts must be accepted.

*– What happened to the participants?*

– Chancellor Baróti – partly because of promoting us and partly because of playing a role in the local events – was sentenced for a three-year imprisonment if I am right. We had a common reminiscence here because we met once in Szeged and even made a documentary. Professor József Perbíró became the leader of the revolution committee and was sentenced for life imprisonment. They let him out after five or six years, he lived in Kecskemét and got married. He led a sequestered life, took small jobs then retired early and became a pensioner. Unfortunately, he has already left us. We had a memorial session in the Auditorium Maximum in 1991 on the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the constituent assembly. We invited Perbíró, Lazúr, Imre Tóth. I do not know anything about the other lecturers. Imre Tóth lives in Budapest. When he got out of jail, he worked as an unskilled worker then he was a proofreader. He did not finish the university, he is a pensioner now and has a grandchild; he is fine. Iván Abrudbányai could finish the university. He worked for a company in Budapest. He has died. Dezsó Gönczöl, the college student... he had a tough life. He was an excellent draughtsman and painter, I have two or three smaller oil paintings from him. He would have liked to prevail but he could



not after regaining his freedom. I think partly it was the reason why he died so early, about ten-fifteen years ago. László Soós could also finish his studies but he could not prevail as well. He is a pensioner. András Lejtényi was with me in Budapest and played a great role in the events, left the country and I have not found him since then, I know nothing about him. I tried to find him through some 1956 organisations operating abroad but nothing came up. Miklós Vető who was not the member of the committee of 18 but was a soulful organiser of AHUCS and a flysheet-maker, later became a lecturer on Sorbonne, Paris. May be he still teaches, I do not know. Now some words about the emigrants with whom I could get in touch. Pál Vezényi – as far as I know – lives in Switzerland and had a decent career. Later it turned out that Lóránt Czigány, an arts student, who I did not know then, who wanted to write articles and wanted to organise the press contacts of AHUCS is a well-known literary historian and wrote several books. That is all instantly. It should be researched.

*– Do you regret anything? What would you do differently now that you know the past?*

– I bless my fate I got the rare opportunity to play a significant role in those wonderful days in 1956. We had not only the revolution but also the ten soulful days before it. An average Hungarian citizen was happy for 12 days, from 23 October to 4 November. But we were happy from 10 of October to 4 November. A few days more. I am very happy I lived then because I think that is the way one's life can be matterful, and in spite of being physically and financially handicapped for thirty-five years, I am still happy. I would not do it differently. But I would like to add that such a historical moment will never come again or at least not in my life but maybe not in yours either. Because it happens once in a century that you can lead a crowd in action in two days and you feel everybody agrees with you, everybody is keen and follows you. The situation made it inevitable, the dictatorship of the previous ten years. And only ten years had passed since World War II, brains

were not washed as during the thirty years of the Kádár system. Everybody kept something in there what set on fire – and exploded. That was the reason why the same events happened in Budapest a week after our assembly. People just walked, no one knew who led them, there was no leader of the revolution. And you can not name a leader even today because you cannot find one. An official Prime Minister followed the events, it was very nice how he accepted our demands. Today I had a conversation with an old companion, who was a member of a worker council in Szeged, maybe in the hemp factory. As it turned out, we were born in the same year. And he got a hard, ten-year sentence and spent five years in prison. And he said the only thing he did not like when someone would say, 'I myself did it!' No. We did it! And I think you could recognise that apart from a few things I always said we. It was never, never the Me that was pushed to the foreground, but always the Us. Of course, it happened that I said something, I wrote something. But the activity was common, a common movement of the crowd. It cannot be turned back. I say it again, I am very happy I could live it. My life would not have been richer if I were a professor now, an academician as some of my grade mates really are. Because this is a valuable life. It is a more colourful life than the other would have been.

– *Thank you.*

– You are very-very welcome.

*Interviewer:  
Csaba Jancsák*