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Erwin Szabo and the Hungarian Revolution

Tibor Forgacz

September 1922

From time to time some Hungarian revolutionary with a death sentence hanging over his head manages to escape from the clutches of the Horthy regime and wanders over the Europe's borders. He flutters from one group of revolutionary comrades to the next and crosses several countries before finally finding some respite in eastern or western Europe. Tibor Forgacz was one of these fugitives. I made his acquaintance somewhere in Europe. He, who had already been so sorely tried, was particularly concerned about the fate of his wife. After he fled, she had been jailed for revolutionary activity and left wide open to the harshest reprisals. Thanks to help from good friends, she too managed to escape and they will both have been reunited somewhere.

One day Tibor Forgacz set down in writing his memories of Erwin Szabo and militarism in Hungary. They possess a naïve charm. He left them with a comrade. Another comrade came into possession of them and they

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remained unknown up until the day I stumbled upon these memories and published them in De Wapens neder. It strikes me that as a matter of importance they should be reprinted in the international revolutionary anti-militarist press. They speak of such facts as may conjure up a new and a better life.

B. DE LIGT

The world war was still raging when Erwin Szabo died.

Even then the monarchy was teetering. Only with the aid of bayonets was it able to cling on. That war, which had already dragged on so long, was drawing to an end. Szabo, that champion of truth, was not able to see the day of the great upset. His entire being thrilled to the fire of events to come. Everything was falling apart and, troubled soul as he was, Szabo was looking forward to an end of militarism; to the revolution! That it had to come, he knew. And he struggled frantically against affliction. Meanwhile the American army and fresh dangers from the Romanians were looming, so that the Austro-Hungarian monarchy was – albeit unsuccessfully – suing for a separate peace. Even then, as Erwin Szabo lay on his death-bed, in despair, thirsting after life and ardently yearning that he might live long enough to witness the collapse of militarism the Hungarian prime minister's dictum "The monarchy is alive and will live on" had a hollow ring to it. Towards the end of September, even as the horrific Argonne and Piave offensives were getting under way and highlighting the red blossoms of revolution, he passed away.

Who was Erwin Szabo? It might be said that he was the Hungarian version of Domela Nieuwenhuis. He had spotted the danger lurking within social democracy and denounced its political jargon. He understood that the power of the proletarian movement would be smashed. He was a far-sighted battler readying himself for a lengthy series of revolutions. In the event of an upset, what

became clear later. But I have no wish to speak of that here. In any event, the Hungarian anti-militarists have done their duty.

The minutes ticked by. Was this death or victory? And ... barely an hour later ... revolutionary anthems could be heard as the two combat companies appeared. The crowd was tearful and triumphant. So, come midnight, the revolutionary committee had its own troops, who took over the telephone exchange, the railway stations, the post offices and all significant points. All of which was happening while the members of the National Council, the bourgeois and Social Democrat revolutionaries, were asleep ... as ever.

By the time these official revolutionary gentlemen found out early the next morning about all these happenings, a tiny band of troops had already removed the city commander and disarmed the guards. Lukasic and his entire staff were taken prisoners. Miraculously, the Social Democratic Party and the National Council changed their outlooks and stood ready now to form a revolutionary government.

The city had slept through it. It had rained all night and the bridges, barracks, warehouses and police stations had quickly fallen into the hands of the revolutionary committee. By the time everyone woke up that morning they suddenly noticed that the system that had turned the mass of the workers into lackeys and slaves of the world war, had collapsed. Collapsed thanks to the efforts of a small band of revolutionaries. The members of that band had striven fearlessly under the shadow of the execution stake until they had accomplished their aim: the destruction of militarism and an end to the war.

Militarism and the war were finished. People were overcome by a feeling of happiness and freedom. The following day, the incoming Minister of War spelled out his programme: "As minister of War, I want to see no more soldiers."

Such was the first Hungarian revolution. It was a purely anti-militarist revolution, the sole purpose of which was the destruction of militarism and an end to the war. And it truly was a revolution for freedom. By its very nature, there was another side to it, as

he sought more than anything else was that the means of production be seized and placed in the service of production based upon the free agreement among the interested parties. Which is why he pressed on with his powerful anti-militarist propaganda throughout the world war and was one of the main figures due to whose efforts Hungarian militarism was felled.

Towards the end of 1915, Erwin Szabo and his male and female co-workers had embarked upon a risky drive to organise a strike for peace and against the war. At the time the workers had already begun to turn away from their self-styled leaders. And it was against the wishes of the Social Democratic Party that, in the midst of a forest of bayonets, thousands of workers embarked upon a militant strike: "Down with the war!", "Down with militarism!", "We demand immediate peace!", their banners read.

There were strikers in every region. Then along came the Social Democrat leaders who did all in their power to take the bite out of those demands. How often did they shriek about the "equal, universal and secret ballot." But this time their gambit did not work. This time their sway over the masses broke down. The strike dragged on. In Budapest and all the industrial cities the government marshalled troops, artillery and machine-guns.

Three days after that, despite the revolutionary gusto with which it had been conducted, the strike ran out of steam. How come? Because the Social Democrats had started to parley. Even so, they too lost out. From then on party discipline had had it. In the big industrial cities the workers stood by the strike. Elsewhere, one can imagine how that first outbreak of anti-militarism by the Hungarian workers was wiped out by the criminal actions of the Social Democratic bosses.

The great anti-militarist strike was broken. But Erwin Szabo and his friends were to persist in their activity. Their influence even made itself felt in the rank of the military. Small teams would slip inside the barracks, the railway stations and the hospitals to sway the soldiery. All of their members acted with incredible bravery

and an outstanding spirit of selflessness and self-sacrifice. Day on day, night on night, the agitation carried on and anti-militarist handbills were distributed, notably to troops returning from the front lines. The results of this were tangible. Day by day the numbers of deserters were soaring.

Several companies were unable to move out because most of their men had gone missing. The comrades carried on with their propaganda, the outlook being excellent.

And then ... In the spring of 1916, the Budapest police stumbled upon the organising centre. Nearly all of the membership of Szabo's group were jailed. But the comrades did everything that was needed to ensure that Szabo himself did not fall into the clutches of the police. And the agitation continued.

Meanwhile death sentences were passed on agitators and deserters. But the movement did not let up and indeed it grew. Partial strikes were erupting everywhere. There were reports arriving from every front to the effect that military discipline was being eased. The discontent was on the rise. The courts martial were operating flat out. Convicted persons were being executed on a daily basis. The military command in Budapest – Lukasic – his own officers had nick-named him “The Craven Executioner” – was mercilessly dispatching deserters and agitators to their deaths.

But the unrest carried on spreading. On one occasion the workers from the state steel plants clashed with the management. The military commander tried to resolve the issue by having his troops open fire on the workers. Resulting in dead and wounded. Within hours, solidarity strikes were breaking out. Covering all of Hungary. For a number of days the workers fought on heroically.

Meanwhile the anti-militarist movement received a great fillip. Revolutionary forces were beginning to organise effectively, despite huge difficulties and operating in accordance with agreed plans. The sailors in Pola mutinied. Troops on the Italian front mutinied. A government crisis ensued.

It was at this point that Erwin Szabo died. He died but his spirit marched on. Revolutionary groups organised an impressive anti-militarist demonstration. An enormous crowd made to march past the Grand Duke's palace. The approaches were barred by troops and police. But the demonstrators broke through the cordon. The soldiers let the people through and when ordered by their officers to open fire, they refused to do so. Then the police fired two volleys. Leaving dead and wounded. There was no describing the people's fury. The following day workers broke into the armouries and arsenals and armed themselves. The government – which also included two Social Democrats – ordered the police to carry out searches of workers' homes and to seize any weapons. But the police, fearful of the workers' vengeance on account of the bloody clash the previous day, declined to obey. With huge repercussions. Anti-militarist revolution was already in the air and was imminent ... The spirit of Erwin Szabo was bearing fruit ...

On the afternoon of 30 October, reports spread that the army command was trying to relocate revolutionary-minded troops far from Budapest. Under the orders of a general, police troops took the revolutionary soldiers' committee prisoners that same afternoon. But the people delivered them from police captivity. Lukasic blew his top. That evening a huge crowd singing revolutionary songs roamed the streets. The crowd was continually swelling and it was marching on the premises where the National Council was holding its proceedings. That Council had been formed just a few days earlier. It was the product of a coalition of bourgeois and Social Democrats fearful of revolution and eager to change the government in order to appoint Count Mihaly Karolyi prime minister.

From that point forward the revolutionary committee began to operate formally. News arrived that Lukasic was keen to banish the last two revolutionary companies far from the city: “Hang on to them!” was the revolutionary committee's very first order. And the crowd marched on the railway station.