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## Hungary: New Film Revisits 1956 Water-Polo Showdown

May 05, 2006

By Nikola Krastev



Hungarians on top of a Soviet tank outside parliament during the Hungarian Uprising (ITAR-TASS) Fifty years ago the water-polo players took to the water to produce one of the most famous – and bloodiest – encounters in Olympic history. A new film seeks to recapture a physical battle that symbolized the political battle for communist Hungary.

NEW YORK, May 5, 2006 (RFE/RL) – When the Hungarian and Soviet water polo teams met in the 1956 Olympics, it was a clash of two of the strongest teams in the world. But almost as soon as the Hungarian and Soviet players took to the water in the semifinal of the competition, the game suddenly transformed itself into something more, a physical and political struggle that remains memorable decades later.

Just three weeks earlier, Soviet forces had invaded the country, crushing the largest popular revolt that Eastern Europe had seen against communism and killing or wounding thousands of Hungarian citizens.



But this was something that the members of Hungary's water-polo team learned only weeks later. Already en route for Australia, they were kept incommunicado, only learning what had happened at home after they arrived in Melbourne.

When they finally entered the water, the Hungarian players had to make the toughest decision of their lives: Should they play a normal match, or was this a supreme moment for them to show to the world Hungary's battle for freedom?

They chose struggle and the Soviet team responded with equal determination. As the two sides fought, the blood and emotion in the water broke the bounds of sport to become a lasting symbol of the Cold War.

Now, a new documentary film seeks to capture those moments.

"Freedom's Fury" was five years in the making. The result is a film that is now being showcased at one of leading film festivals in the United States, the Tribeca Film Festival in New York, which runs until May 7.

## **Fury And A Sense Of Betrayal**

American-Canadian director Colin Gray and his sister, director of photography Megan Raney, say they began the project in 1999 by starting to track down the surviving players of the game. At that time, eight of the original members of the Hungarian team were still alive, as well as five from the Soviet team.

"Right off the bat, everyone we spoke to was really eager to meet again," says Raney. "For them to have an opportunity to come together and shake hands finally 50 years later, almost 50 years later was a life-changing moment."

The 90-minute film follows a dual narrative, juxtaposing the battle fought in Australia with the tumultuous street events in Hungary.

The archival footage from Hungary shows young students who, at first, march peacefully through Budapest's streets, amazed by the huge number of people from all layers of society who spontaneously decided to join them.

"They really believed that if they fought for their rights and stood up that the West would be there to recognize them, to support them, and to help them," says Gray. "There is a very strong sense of betrayal in Hungary to this day from the people who lived through it. They won, and...they really thought the West would be there to recognize them and support them – and they didn't."

**Quentin Tarantino**  
**"flipped out. He was just like 'This is the best story I've been ever told, I'd love to be involved.'"**



"Freedom's Fury" is narrated by Mark Spitz, the U.S. swimmer who won a total of 11 medals at the 1972 and 1976 games, setting a record for Olympic swimmers.

The filmmakers say Spitz took a very personal interest in the story because he was coached in his teens by Ervin Zador, an Hungarian player punched in the eye during the famous Melbourne showdown.

In fact, it was Zador's injury that proved the emotional turning point of the match. When he emerged from the pool with his face bleeding heavily, passions among the spectators rose so high that police were called to prevent a riot. The match was abandoned shortly before full time and Hungary – then leading – was credited with victory.

## **An Opportunity For Reconciliation**



Bodies on a Budapest street after the suppression of the Hungarian Uprising (ITAR-TASS)

But the film is not only about a sporting and political struggle that, as Raney puts it, became "such a big event for the Hungarian people and for the people who were watching the games in Melbourne and then around the world." It is also a tribute to the ability of men who once met as bitter foes to forgive with the passage of time and to come to terms with history.

Gray says that when the filmmakers were finally able to get together the 13 surviving players in 2002, the reunion was a profound emotional moment. The remaining players understood this would be the second and likely last meeting in their lives. For several, that has already proved to be the case: Pyotr Mshvenieradze, a Georgian who was the captain of the Soviet team, passed away last year and Laszlo Jenei, a member of the Hungarian team, passed away last week.



"Both teams were as much a victim of the circumstances and really both countries were imprisoned by the same ideology – and these guys were able to finally reconnect as human beings and as fellow athletes," says Gray. "That was something that we really wanted to highlight, the sort of humanistic side to counter the sort of oppression of ideology that everyone had suffered under in the Eastern bloc."

The film is produced by Lucy Liu and Quentin Tarantino, better known for their involvement in films of highly stylized violence such as "Kill Bill."

Raney says the two producers became instantly hooked on the story.

Liu "was thrilled and she was like 'What can I do to help, I really want to be involved.' So she helped us to organize a fund-raiser in Los Angeles. At that point she was in negotiations with 'Kill Bill' with Quentin Tarantino, so she invited him down to the fundraiser. He flipped out. He was just like 'This is the best story I've been ever told, I'd love to be involved.' So the two of them came on as very early investors."

The documentary film aims at younger audiences by combining bright color images with grainy black and white archival footage at a crisp, sometimes breakneck speed.

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