



THE INDEPENDENT

Ervin Zador: Blood in the water

Fifty years after the brutal event, Mike Rowbottom talks to Hungary's pool hero who defied the Soviet Union (Published: 02 December 2006)

It is one of the great, resonant Olympic images. A young man is helped from a swimming pool, blood pouring down his cheek and body. His wound, created by a Russian fist, stands also for the grievous wounds freshly inflicted by the Soviet Union upon his mother country, Hungary. Just four weeks after the 1956 Hungarian Uprising was crushed by 200,000 Soviet troops - leaving more than 5,000 dead and causing nearly a quarter of a million people to flee - water polo teams from the two countries met at the Melbourne Olympics for what turned out to be one of the most violent, politically charged encounters in Games history.

The 50th anniversary of the match, which falls this week, has been marked by a documentary entitled **Freedom's Fury** which sets the fateful meeting in historical context and features numerous protagonists, including the man made bloodied and emblematic at the age of 21, Ervin Zador. The project of siblings Colin Keith Gray and Megan Raney was championed by two influential executive producers - Quentin Tarantino and Lucy Liu - and narrated by the multiple Olympic swimming champion Mark Spitz, who was coached as a youngster by Zador after the Hungarian had made a new life in California. Although the film has yet to earn a general release, it was No 1 in the Hungarian box office for six weeks.

It is hardly surprising that the Hungarians should have embraced a story which deals, effectively, with their collective soul. When the Hungarian Uprising began on 24 October, the players were trapped in their training venue in the hills above Budapest without access to a pool. They remained there in confusion with their Soviet minders, hearing gunfire from the city below and seeing fires burning.

By the time the players were taken to Prague to start their journey to Australia, they had heard that the Russians were pulling out. But the team's spirit plunged after touchdown at Darwin. Less than a fortnight after the Soviets had left Hungary, the tanks had returned to break the fledgling government headed by Imre Nagy and restore a Communist rule that would last until 1989.

"We were in the restaurant, waiting to change planes, when we heard that the Russians had taken care of the Revolution," Zador recalled this week from his home near Sacramento. "I stood up with a glass of whatever I was drinking and announced I was not going home. It had been bad before. Now I felt it was going to be much worse, and that the Russians would never leave.

"Normally such a statement would have meant no Olympics for a player. But the team officials were still unsure of how things would turn out back home and so I got away with it. Even today I am shivering thinking about the risk I took. Other players felt the same way, but didn't say out loud. By the time we got to Melbourne we just wanted to get the job done that we had worked so hard for. But we were very afraid that we were out of shape because we hadn't been in the water for almost a month."

The team sat down together in the Olympic village and devised their own revolution - a tactical one involving the method of zone defence which is now widely used in the sport.



"We became very defence-minded," Zador said. "We had travelled all over the world and people didn't expect us to play like that. Our opponents didn't know how to handle it. We double-marked the most dangerous opponent and chose one player to leave free. We shouted to him: 'OK. Go ahead and shoot.' No one expected to be given the choice to shoot against us. But we had a very good keeper, and these players became nervous, and then they were never going to score. It was totally a mind game."

Hungary duly won all three group matches to earn a semi-final against the runners-up in the other group - the USSR. Thus, at 3.25pm on 6 December, 1956, the most extraordinary match in water polo history began. Ironically, the Hungarians had planned merely to intensify their mind games and provoke their opponents into error. "We had decided to try and make the Russians angry to distract them," Zador said. "The plan was: 'we play, they fight'. We spoke their language - back home we had all been made to learn two hours of Russian every day - and so we were able to tell them how much we disliked them, and their families. And soon they were fighting. "

But soon, too, the Hungarians were responding in kind as the match swiftly became a turmoil of kicking, gouging, and grappling above and below the water line. The Hungarian captain, Dezso Gyarmati, caught a Russian opponent with a sucker punch that - unlike the one delivered upon Zador - was caught on film. The match degenerated into open warfare.

Hundreds of Hungarian emigres were in the stands waving the flags which had flourished briefly in Budapest, freed of the Soviet emblem, and they set up a mountainous chant of '**Hajra Magyarck!**' (Go Hungarians!) The Hungarians responded, establishing a 4-0 lead before the incident that unwittingly turned Zador into an emblematic image of the Olympic Games. It began with a tactical switch.

"Antal Bolvari asked me if I would take over because he had got hit and thought he had ruptured his eardrum," Zador recalled. "The man he was marking, Valentin Prokopov, had become too much of a handful. I was happy to oblige, I felt very good, and the game was decided by that time.

"So I looked after Prokopov for the last few minutes, and I told him that he was a loser, and that his family were losers and so on... there was no problem until I made a huge error. I looked up to question why the referee had blown his whistle. I shouldn't have taken my eye off Prokopov. The next thing I saw, he had his full upper body out of the water and he was swinging at my head with an open arm.

"I could imagine he wasn't very happy because the game was won and lost. All he had was anger. After he hit me I was seeing about 48 stars. Man, oh man, I was just like a stuffed pig." A deep cut near Zador's right eye began to well with blood that clouded the pool. Spectators began to boo ferociously and many poured down from their seats, seemingly intent on attacking the Russians. The referee halted the game a minute early, and the Soviet players were led from the pool under police escort. "We were playing not just for ourselves but for every Hungarian," Zador was quoted in the aftermath. "This was the only way we could fight back."

His eye swelled up so badly that he was unable to play in the final, but his team-mates retained the Olympic title with a 2-1 win over Yugoslavia. "I tried everything to play," Zador recalled. "But the doctors insisted I couldn't. Watching was agony - I was sure we were going to lose the Olympics because I wasn't there. So when we won - oh, it was awesome."

Zador has had many years to adopt the Americanisms that strew his speech after making that momentous announcement at Darwin airport. "At 21, I was spoken of as one of the best players in the world," he recalled. "So to give all that up was a huge decision for me. Humungous. I don't regret it, though. Freedom is like breathing. Breathing openly."