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THE LOST RADIO
FREE EUROPE TAPES

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BUDAPEST

THE LOST RFE TAPES

Graeme Stevenson writes : the following extract comes from the book 'Radio Free Europe the Pursuit of Democracy' by the late George Urban and is reprinted with thanks to Yale University Press. It concerns the 1956 Hungarian Uprising

For the best part of four decades, historians as well as Radio Free Europe's own staff had been looking for the oral and written record of the Radio's 1956 Hungarian-language broadcasts—but nothing could be found. Both the original typescripts and the tape-recorded sound-evidence were said to have been destroyed, and it was widely assumed that the destruction had been ordered by the American security authorities, to forestall embarrassment.

Approaches made by historians to the German Bundesarchiv (fed-

eral archive) in Koblenz were fruitless. In 1956–57 the Adenauer government ordered an enquiry to establish whether the Radio had, as was widely believed, incited the Hungarians to rise against their rulers—but on January 25, 1957, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer himself returned a "not guilty" verdict. I assumed that eventually the materials on which the German investigation had been based must have been passed on to the Bundesarchiv for safe keeping; but repeatedly, representatives of the Bundesarchiv denied any knowledge of them. Requests addressed to American sources proved equally futile.

After the collapse of the Soviet system I decided to rake through the field once again. On August 27, 1993, William Raedemakers, the Radio Free Europe policy adviser's assistant for Hungarian affairs (as well as a broadcaster in his own right) told me that by the end of November 1956 he himself had been unable to retrieve the tapes of his own comments, because all recorded evidence of what had been transmitted during the critical weeks had been destroyed. Raedemakers, with his background in American security, was the most authentic witness I had yet encountered. The Radio's archivist, who had apparently seen (or overseen) the destruction, was a friend of his, whose testimony he trusted. I had no reason to doubt Raedemakers's account.

Yet in Budapest, after a long trawl, I managed in October 1993, with the cooperation of Géza Jeszenszky, then Hungarian foreign minister, and Magdaléna Cséve, head of the Hungarian (Budapest) Radio's sound archives, to retrieve several hours of Radio Free Europe's Hungarian-language broadcasts. These were materials which had been monitored by the communist authorities in 1956 for their senior officials in Budapest, Prague, and Bucharest and then deposited in the archives of Radio Budapest. I chose the Budapest venue on the assumption that even if no record had survived in Western Europe or the United States, there was a reasonable chance that the Radio Free Europe transmissions monitored by the communist authorities for their own information would turn up in postcommunist Hungary. And so they did.

With this small treasure in hand I then proceeded to go through Radio Free Europe's own files in Munich. Here, too, I had been assured by all and sundry (including the Radio's senior officers) that thorough-going searches had failed to unearth either typescripts or tapes from the 1956 period. All the greater, then, was my astonishment when on the very first day of my work in Munich I came upon a fine hoard of

typescripts in the Radio's archives, neatly stored in file boxes, clearly labelled, and possibly unread. How they had escaped destruction and then the eyes of earlier researchers puzzled me. I came away with photocopies of the entire—though I believe still incomplete—collection.

But an even greater surprise was in store for me. In the summer of 1995, György Vámos, the new head of the recorded sound archives of Hungarian Radio, stumbled (as he claims) upon the entire sound record of Radio Free Europe's 1956 Hungarian-language broadcasts, in one of the apparently unvisited backrooms of the German Bundesarchiv.⁵ He secured release of the holdings, and Hungarian Radio began to grant historians, journalists, and, ironically, Radio Free Europe itself limited access to it. I was one of the early beneficiaries. Had I anticipated this fortunate outcome, I could have saved myself a great deal of work and expense.

Why Bundesarchiv officials agreed to release these tape recordings to Hungarian Radio, after having denied access for more than four decades to bona fide historians and Radio Free Europe itself, must remain a matter of conjecture. That officials of the archive had no knowledge of their holdings seems improbable. They may have decided against releasing the tapes to Radio Free Europe alone on the reasoning that given the damaging character of some of the recordings, Radio Free Europe might withhold them from the general public for a second time, even though the Cold War was over. Hungarian (Budapest) Radio was much less likely to be economical with exposure. And indeed, beginning in the fall of 1995 under the socialist-led coalition government of Gyula Horn, long extracts from these 1956 transmissions were re-broadcast to the Hungarian public to mark the anniversary of various phases of the revolution—without any "we told you so" emphasis. But in the volatile climate of Central European politics it would be a bold man indeed who predicted that these broadcasts would not one day become a political football in as yet unforeseeable circumstances.

5. In the judgement of Vámos, with whom I spent time in Budapest examining some of his materials in May 1996, the tape recordings were more likely to have come from German civilian or military monitoring sources than from Radio Free Europe. This would make sense, for the materials handed over for examination to the German government in 1956 are said to have been in the form of scripts, not tape recordings.

34. On May 22, 1997, Radio Free Europe pledged to provide the Hungarian National Széchenyi Library with copies of about five thousand audiotapes, some six kilometers of microfilm, and about seven hundred thousand pages of programme scripts. According to a Radio Free Europe statement, these materials contain copies of everything that was *preserved* at the Radio from the 1951-93 period. On June 6, 1997, A. Ross Johnson, counsellor to RFE/RL, noted, "This is far from a complete record. . . . The tape collection is very partial."

If any ORCA members possess copies of these recordings, please get in touch with either Barry or myself at the usual addresses (see page 3).

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