

# THE FIRST HIJACKER'S STORY MAY HIT SCREEN

## Successful plot to leave Communist Hungary has all elements of blockbuster script, director says

By [Peter Rowe](#) ([/staff/peter-rowe/](#)) 5:05 a.m. May 31, 2015

Every element in Frank Iszak's tale — the unheard-of aerial hijacking, the life-or-death brawl aboard an out-of-control airplane, the pistol that wouldn't fire, the plot that shouldn't have succeeded — seems perfect for Hollywood.

Maybe too perfect. "So many cliffhangers!" Iszak said. "You'd almost have to eliminate some or it will seem too much. But this is all historically proven."

Now 83, Iszak runs a yoga studio in Rancho Santa Fe with his wife, Serpil. Through his Silver Age foundation, he's donated 13,000 yoga classes to worthy students, but he's not exactly world famous. But on July 13, 1956 — mark that date — he gained international attention for his bold escape from communist-controlled Hungary. With six co-conspirators, Iszak seized an airliner and set a course for the West. Four and a half hours after takeoff, they landed at a half-completed airfield.

After tangling with a KGB agent.

Evading Soviet MiGs.

Crossing the mist-enshrouded Alps.

And nearly exhausting their plane's fuel.

"This is a great tale," said Endre Hules, a film and stage director who wants to bring this epic to the screen.

Too great? Take another look at the escape's date. This unlucky day for Hungary's communist rulers was Friday the 13th.

### Spellbinder

A few years ago, Balboa Park's House of Hungary screened "The Maiden Danced to Death." Hules, director of the 2011 drama, drove from Los Angeles to talk to the audience.

After the movie, he was cornered by a white-haired man. "He told me what I usually dread to hear," Hules said. "He told me, 'I just finished my memoirs and I think it would make a good movie.'"

The self-published paperback was Iszak's "Free for All to Freedom." Hules reluctantly accepted a copy — "OK, fine" — and took it home. A week later, feeling obligated, he cracked it open.

"I read the first page," Hules said, "and I couldn't put it down."

The tale had romance, humor, suspense. "And it was also very much in my area of interest," said Hules, 55, a native of Hungary whose credits include a documentary about the 1956 Hungarian revolution. "I was very much at home in that whole era. My parents were on the barricades."

This era and setting is unfamiliar to many Americans, though, including Americans who finance movies. And while the hijacking was reported by The New York Times and Time, this tale has been eclipsed by the Hungarian Revolution. Shortly after the hijacking, protesters toppled Budapest's communist government. Then Soviet tanks crushed the nascent republic and installed a new Moscow-approved regime.

"The October '56 revolution sort of washed away everything else," Hules said. "This was sort of forgotten."

Yet Iszak's story has potential and support. Vilmos Zsigmond, the cinematographer who won an Oscar for "Close Encounters of the Third Kind," has signed on.

Already, Hules has scouted locations in Hungary and won the backing of that country's film czar. All red tape will be snipped and barriers toppled — once the production company raises the film's estimated budget of \$10 million.

"Everybody loves this story," Hules said. "We have the second half of funding many times over — people say, 'If you get the first

## ‘Stars lining up’

When the Communist Party took control of Hungary in 1949, Iszak figured his future was bright. The 18-year-old had good grades, a proletariat background — father was a railroad watchman, mother a farm laborer — and skill as a boxer.

“I wanted to be a writer,” he said. “But the Communist Party said, ‘We don’t need no writers. You are going to the University of Chemical Engineering, or you are not going anywhere.’”

Disillusioned, the youth finally followed orders. The student also wrote for a newspaper, though, and was forced out of school for writing articles criticizing his university. He took his independent attitude to another newspaper, where his stories outlined collective farming’s deficiencies. Soon, he had lost his job and his freedom.

“I was ‘disappeared’ into a uranium mine,” he said, “where I was a slave laborer.”

Six months later, he escaped. Without papers, he found menial work at a brick factory near Budapest. He joined the company’s boxing squad, where a teammate was a former fighter pilot being punished for refusing to join the Communist Party. Iszak and George Polyak became friends and, in time, co-conspirators.

“George,” Iszak said over beers one evening, “if you can’t crawl under the Iron Curtain, how about flying over?”

For their far-fetched scheme, they enlisted others on the boxing team and Iszak’s wife of nine months. (Anais Iszak’s immediate response to her husband’s risky plan: “When do we leave?”) On July 13, 1956, they boarded an officially-sanctioned flight to a tournament near Hungary’s western border. At a signal, Polyak took a wrench to the closed cockpit door while his mates searched other passengers, certain there was an undercover KGB agent aboard.

There was, but in the cockpit. When Polyak cracked open the door, the KGB man took aim with his pistol. It jammed. Polyak’s own pistol misfired. The boxer swung at his foe as the pilot threw the plane into a dive, flinging conspirators and other passengers against the ceiling and bulkhead.

Minutes from a crash landing, Polyak won control of the plane as his teammates pinned down the agent and aircrew.

Even so, stormy weather limited visibility, making for a tense passage over the Alps. Then two MiGs were scrambled to intercept the plane. Too late — the Soviet fighters turned back when the hijackers exited Hungarian airspace.

The twin-engine airliner’s fuel gauge read empty when Polyak spotted a runway. They landed, but didn’t know if they were safely inside West Germany or trapped in East Germany, destined for torture and execution.

Iszak carried a pistol with five bullets. “I was going to kill my wife and myself,” he said.

The airfield, though, was a half-completed NATO base. They were safe.

While a Hungarian court condemned the hijackers to death, in absentia, the entire team settled in the United States. Iszak worked as a chemist in New York and San Francisco. He and Anais divorced in 1967. He married Serpil, a fellow yoga instructor, in 1994.

In recent years, Iszak has been applauded for the yoga classes he donates to people coping with various ailments. Diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease a decade ago, he remains limber and active.

He’s also buoyed by his earlier adventures: “The series of unplanned, unforeseeable events were stacked up. It was like the stars lining up.

“You couldn’t write a better script.”

Still, he hopes Hollywood will be tempted to try.

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