

TIME

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in
"My Fair Lady"

At least six of the 15 passengers boarding the Hungarian airliner at Budapest one day last week carried with them equipment not generally considered essential to air travel. But for the six concerned, the cheap iron wrench that each kept concealed and near at hand was as good as a ticket to freedom. As the plane took off on its regular run to the border town of Szombathely, the six sat silent, warily scrutinizing their fellow passengers and keeping a watchful eye on one of their number, a former air-force lieutenant named Gyorgy Polyak, who carried not only a wrench but a revolver (which did not work). The silence was broken only by the nervous chattering of the wife of one of the young freedom seekers, who could not for the life of her understand why she was being dragged off on an expensive flight to such a dull spot as Szombathely.

Someone Aboard. At last the signal came. "Hey," said Lieut. Polyak loudly, "there's Gyor." Some of the passengers turned in their seats to peer out of the windows. According to a prearranged plan, the six wrench carriers began to count silently and slowly to 300 in order to bring the airliner, according to Polyak's calculation, to the westernmost point in its course. At the end of the count, Polyak leaped from his seat and headed for the pilot's compartment. The others sprang into action against their fellow passengers, laying about them right and left with wrenches, floorboards, fists. In a moment the vintage twin-engined Douglas transport became the scene of one of the greatest airborne free-for-alls in flying history. "We knew someone aboard the ship was a Communist security agent," explained one of the wrench wielders later, "but we didn't know which one."

As Lieut. Polyak worked with his wrench to open the door of the pilot's compartment, the outer knob of which had been removed (an ordinary flying precaution in Communist countries), the pilot himself threw the ship into a series of violent maneuvers, sudden power dives, steep climbing turns and skidding yawing. Inside the cabin the embattled passengers rattled about like ice cubes in a cocktail shaker, while heavy crates of cargo, torn loose from their moorings, cascaded back and forth.

Glued to the Roof. At last Polyak got the pilot's door open only to face a flight mechanic brandishing a Very pistol, and the secret agent, who was furiously loading an automatic. With a comrade's help, Polyak rushed to the attack, while the pilot continued to whirl the plane through its crazy dancing. "Some of the worst of the fight took place while we were glued to the roof of the plane," said Polyak later. At last the lieutenant managed to wrest the gun from the Red agent and fire a shot into the air. Capitulating immediately, and terrified of official vengeance if he ever got back to Hungary, the agent begged Polyak to shoot him then and there. Polyak refused. Instead, dripping with gore and minus three front teeth, he went forward to the copilot's seat and, holding the agent's gun at the pilot's temple, took charge of the plane. Somewhere in the skirmish he had lost his map, but spotting an airfield and some jeeps in what he guessed to be West German territory, Polyak brought the plane down. The field was a still-unfinished NATO air base at Ingolstadt.

As one of the refugees thrust a bloody head out to ask where they were, West German police roared up to surround the plane. Communists and anti-Communists alike were gathered up in the gory shambles and carted off to a nearby hospital. As

Hungary's Communist rulers set official radio channels buzzing with demands for the return of plane and passengers, two of the travelers who had known nothing of the plot to seize the airplane decided to join those who had planned it. Another, breathing the air of freedom, was restrained from asking for asylum only by the thought of what might happen to his family if he failed to return.