



 As Melbourne celebrated the 1956 Olympic Games, cold war superpowers vied for information and influence.

VIC News

The plot to help Hungarian athletes defect at the 1956 Olympics

Harry Blutstein, Dalby Herald

September 4, 2017 10:47am

 Subscriber only

- [Extract: Psychoanalysing Alphonse Gangitano](#)
- [Extract: How police caught the Bali bombers](#)
- [Extract: How the SOG conduct a raid](#)

THE following cable was received by the New York office of TimeLife Inc. on 23 November 1956: ESTIMATES OF LIKELY AUSSIE FOOTBALL PLAYERS AVAILABLE AFTER GAMES VARY BETWEEN 20 AND 50 PERCENT OF TEAM.

This cable was the first of many that passed between coach Greg Turnbull in Melbourne and Charles Johnson of the Merion Cricket Club during November and December 1956. Taken at face value they are about exhibition matches of Aussie rules football in the US,

with the authors dwelling on which players would be joining the tour. Curiously, the numbers fluctuated from day to day suggesting the Australian footballers were a flighty lot, uncertain about whether they wanted to go to the US or not.

As it turned out the cables had nothing to do with football but were coded to disguise their real purpose. They concerned Operation Griffin, a plan to spirit Hungarian athletes who had decided to defect, to the US.



 Hungary had descended into chaos months before the games with a failed revolution against the Soviet-controlled government.

US Cold War propaganda had much to gain from well publicised defections of communist athletes during the Games. However, this operation cut across the Australian government's policy of not encouraging athletes to defect before the end of the Games. Had it been a CIA operation this would have been a problem.

However, ASIO had rejected the CIA's offer to send its agents to Melbourne and Operation Griffin was a private venture, unaware of Australia's policy on asylum seekers.

Operation Griffin had its genesis at a meeting held on 11 November 1956 when Count Anthony Szapáry entertained fellow Hungarian, Whitney Tower, at his luxury home in the picturesque town of Pound Ridge, an hour's drive from Manhattan. Over dinner, Szapáry described Operation Griffin. Tower was turf editor of *Sports Illustrated*, which was owned

by Henry Luce of Time-Life, and Szapáry hoped Tower would take the proposal to his employer.

Why Luce? He was a fervent anti-communist, and on 6 November had denounced the Soviet invasion of Hungary at a benefit for refugees at Madison Square Garden.

Szapáry had already sent one of his people, George Telegdy, to Melbourne to approach athletes, but without additional help the operation might fail. Szapáry hoped Luce would allow his journalists, who were in Melbourne to cover the Olympics for *Sports Illustrated*, to support Telegdy. He also wanted to tap Luce's deep pockets as he lacked the funds to house, feed and fly the athletes to the United States. He also needed Luce's contacts in the State Department to

fast-track the athletes' applications for asylum.



📷 Some of the Hungarian athletes on their bus at the 1956 Olympic Games.

Once the Hungarians were in the US they would participate in the Freedom Tour of 48 states. Telegdy referred to the tour as Operation Eagle, and it would raise funds for Hungarian refugees and provide opportunities for anti-Soviet propaganda. The pay-off for Luce would be that *Sports Illustrated* would get free publicity during the tour and exclusive copy.

On 15 November Tower wrote a memo describing his meeting with Szapáry and Operation Griffin. Soon after, the memo arrived

on the desk of CD Jackson, Luce's vice president. Four years earlier Luce had loaned his deputy to Eisenhower as his speechwriter during the 1952 election and afterwards to advise the new president how to boost America's capabilities to fight the Cold War. Known as CD by his friends, he immediately saw the propaganda potential of defecting athletes and convinced Luce to bankroll Operation Griffin and allow the *Sports Illustrated* journalists in Melbourne to help Telegdy.

From his New York office CD supported the operation by harnessing his extensive networks within the private sector, State Department and possibly the CIA to smooth the way for the athletes to enter the US.

On 19 November photographer Coles Phinizy left for Australia to join his *Sports Illustrated* colleagues. Once in Melbourne he briefed them on the operation and handed over a code he had devised on the plane, which the journalists would use to keep New York informed.

The code was not particularly sophisticated. Had the KGB intercepted these cables its agents would have only needed a basic knowledge of Australian rules football to know something was afoot.



📷 Ervin Zador of Hungary injured in the water polo match against the Russian team at the Olympic pool.



📷 The front page of *The Sun*, after the water polo match.

Each of the Hungarian athletes was given the name of an Australian Rules footballer. The water polo captain Dezső Gyarmati became David Gregory, and his wife, the swimmer Éva Székely, was Edward Shawn. A quick check of the newspapers would have shown these names did not correspond to any current or past players.

Another flaw in the code was that male athletes were footballers from Victoria and the women from NSW. The problem was that at the time Australian rules was mocked in NSW as 'aerial ping-pong', and rugby was its ruling passion. In the 1950s if ever a civil war broke out in Australia it would have been over football codes between the country's two most populous states. So the proposition that NSW had an Aussie rules team worthy of touring the US was risible.

CD became Charles Johnson of the Merion Cricket Club, who was helping arrange exhibition matches, and the Football Federation stood for the State Department.

Coach Turnbull was George Telegdy, whom the journalists relied on to make contact with the athletes as none of them spoke Hungarian.

By 23 November Telegdy had made some progress, as described in a cable sent to New York. It reported that up to half the team was thinking of defecting. This cable also warned: AUSSIE FOOTBALLERS REPORTEDLY CLOSELY WATCHED BY FANS AND FOLLOWERS AND ITS NOT EASY TO TALK TO THEM AT THE MOMENT. Decoding the cable, the 'fans and followers' were the security police.

The Hungarian athletes were fully aware they were being watched by ÁVO agents, its informers and possibly by the KGB. Consequently, those thinking of defecting were careful to put out feelers discreetly.



 At the time of the Olympics, the situation in Hungary was still precarious.

However, everyone's first priority was to find out whether their families were safe, which made securing firm commitments to join the Freedom Tour difficult.

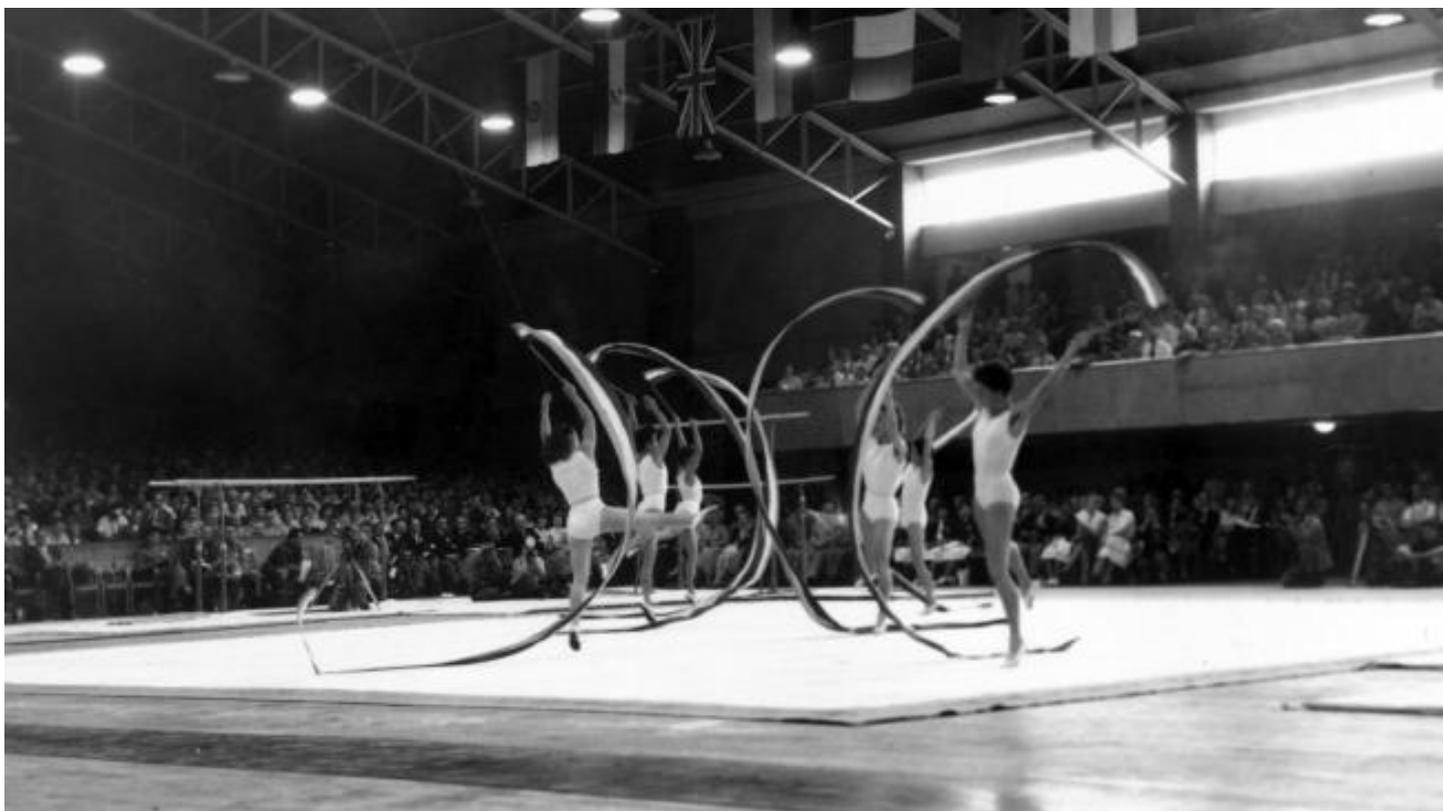
Every athlete's circumstance was unique and each struggled to decide whether to stay or return home. For some their task was made a little bit easier when, on 29 November, the new Hungarian government issued an amnesty to everyone who left the county between 23 October and the date of the amnesty, provided they return by 31 March 1957. Telegdy used this announcement to argue they could go on the Freedom Tour, which would give them an opportunity to see whether they liked the US, and return home afterwards should they wish.

The fear of consequences was real and plans had been put in place well before the Olympics to deal with athletes who did not return to Hungary. On 30 July 1955 Ferenc Keleti from the sports ministry prepared for just such a contingency by 'letting athletes know that in case of them absconding, their relatives would be subject to retaliation'. Every athlete knew this and it influenced their decision.

Responsibility for the team was squarely on the shoulders of Gyula Hegyi. As head of the Hungarian Olympic delegation he knew he could be reprimanded, or worse, if he failed to bring the team home intact.

His main consolation was he was held in good stead by the athletes. While they accepted he was a good comrade they also suspected he loved sports more than he loved communism. There were many occasions when he stood up to the security police who wanted to ban 'politically unreliable' athletes from overseas competition, as he had done before the Helsinki Games, four years earlier. He was a tall, stout man with a light dusting of snow-white hair and eyebrows that were defiantly black; most of the athletes liked him and called him 'bácsi' (uncle).

In the final week of the Games a stream of athletes knocked on Hegyi's door to tell him they were not going to return home. They were emotional meetings and many athletes left Hegyi's room in tears.



📷 The Hungarian women's Gymnastic team in action at the West Melbourne stadium in 1956.

The fencer Béla Rerrich told Hegyi, 'I'm not a Communist but you've treated me so well that I thought I'd let you know my intentions.' He announced he was going to Sweden where his wife and two daughters were waiting for him. Hegyi replied, 'I used to be a refugee so I understand what you're going through.' He then handed him some unfiltered cigarettes, a pungent blend from home that only a Hungarian could love, and a garlicky Csabai salami, saying with a twinkle in his eye, 'You never know when you might need it.'

Radio broadcaster György Szepesi believed he was out of favour with the new regime, and turned to Hegyi for advice. 'You have a younger sister here,' said Hegyi. 'If I were you I'd spend time with her.'

He went on to point out that Szepesi's Olympic visa did not expire until February 1957 so he could delay his return. Hegyi then quoted an old Hungarian saying, 'He who manages to win time, wins life.' As Szepesi left, Hegyi handed him a bottle of Hungarian wine and one of his seemingly endless supplies of salamis.

Szepesi took Hegyi's advice and in support of his application for asylum, he informed ASIO he wouldn't return home because he would be subject 'to pressure for dissemination of propaganda, which would be repugnant'. He then moved to Sydney and worked in his brother-in-law's cafe.

In early 1957 the Hungarian government told him he would be welcomed home. This should have been no surprise as Szepesi had, since 1950, been an informer for the Political Investigation Department, with the codename 'Galambos'. So, forgetting his repugnance for being a conduit for communist propaganda, he returned to Hungary and went on to an

illustrious career as a radio sports broadcaster and presumably continued his career as an informer.

Water polo player Miklós Martin also knocked on Hegyi's door.



📷 Laszlo Papp of Hungary (right) in action against American Jose Torres in the 1956 boxing final.

‘Gyula bácsi, I’ve decided not go back to Hungary.’ Practised by now, Hegyi replied, ‘Good luck but if you change your mind you’ll always be accepted back home with open arms.’

As the end of the Olympics approached, Hegyi realised a large number of athletes and officials would not be returning to Hungary and he needed to start thinking about himself.

Late one night, after an evening of meeting athletes who intended to defect, Hegyi went on an epic bender. In the early hours of the morning some athletes watched him stagger out into the forecourt of the Hungarian compound wearing his pyjamas. Standing unsteadily before the flag pole he solemnly saluted. He would not have been human if he was not worried about his future. And he had much to be worried about.

In Nymburk, en route to Australia, he had not prevented the revolutionary committee usurping his authority.

And with a large number of athletes not returning to Hungary, he would be accused of being weak and even incompetent. He had also made conciliatory comments to Australian newspapers that could be seen by the new regime in Budapest as giving athletes permission to defect. ‘There is no compulsion on anyone to return,’ he had told the *Argus*. ‘It is up to

each individual to make up his own mind.’ And here he was saluting the Kossuth flag in the middle of the night; the same flag that had been adopted by the freedom fighters.

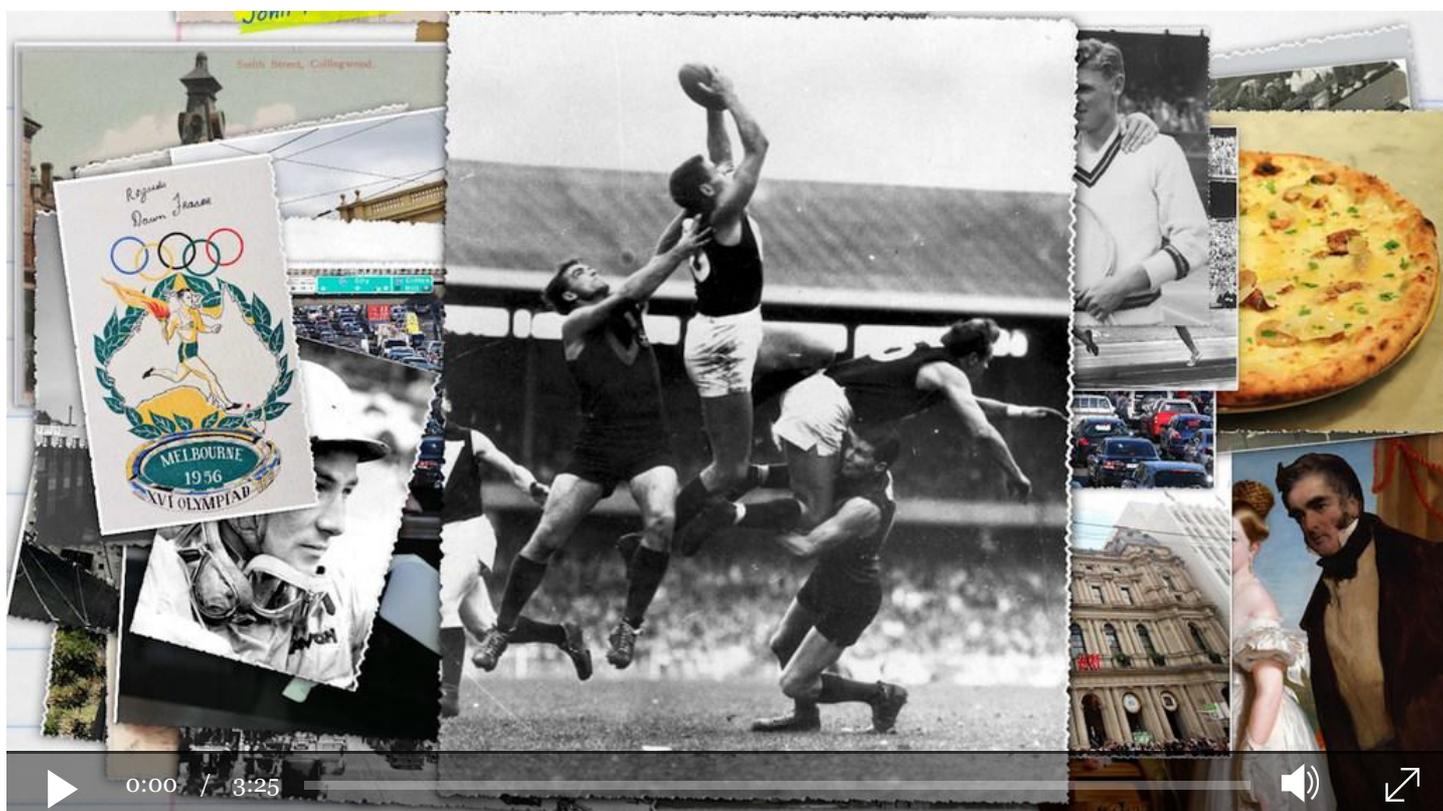
The Hungarian team was due to fly out on 7 December, a day before the closing ceremony, so they would need to commit themselves before that date.

The Australian government was unhelpful, telling the athletes it would not consider their applications for asylum until after the Games had ended.

The Americans were more welcoming and Consul-General Gerald Warner informally spoke to athletes, encouraging them to seek asylum in the US. Two days before the Games ended he told the New York Times, ‘the United States would look with favour on any pleas for political asylum from any Olympic Games athletes — Hungarian or otherwise.’

As most of the athletes did not own passports they would not be allowed to leave Australia without exit visas. Facing a tangle of red tape, the athletes could only hope they would not be left in limbo.

Behind the scenes as the departure date approached, officials within the Hungarian team had their own dramas. On 6 December Hegyi was told by the French airline TAI that it wanted a £46,000 deposit by 6pm that day before it would fly the team back to Europe. Getting so much money in such a short time from Budapest was impossible, but within three hours he was able to raise the funds: the USSR provided £44,000 and several Eastern European countries made up the balance. It was all in hard currency.



A history of Melbourne

József Molnár took a suitcase with the money to a suburban branch of the National Bank of Australasia located near the Olympic Village so it could be transferred to the airline's account. He arrived at 4.50pm, ten minutes before closing. When the teller opened the suitcase he panicked. Alarms went off and the building was quickly surrounded by police. It is not quite clear why the teller became frightened. Thieves are not known to arrive with suitcases full of

cash but rather with empty suitcases they hope to fill with money from a bank's safe. Nevertheless he was a foreign gentleman and the teller felt something suspicious was afoot, even if he could not quite work out the angle. Once Molnár was given an opportunity to explain the transaction the money was expeditiously transferred to the TAI account before the deadline.

There is one more twist to the story. When the team met for the last time at the Olympic Village, Hegyi shocked everyone when he announced he would not be going home immediately because of a cancerous lump behind his ear that could only be treated by a certain Australian professor in Sydney. It was obvious to everyone this was a ploy to stay behind. Evidently worried about his own fate, he was just taking the advice he had been providing to the athletes: delay returning to Hungary until the political situation became clearer. After the meeting, senior officials loyal to the government confronted Hegyi and insisted he return home. It was a heated exchange and eventually Hegyi backed down and agreed to return to Europe.

While Hegyi and the team were winging their way back to Hungary, the Australian authorities decided the athletes seeking asylum were in real danger of being kidnapped by the Russians and spirited away on their ship, the Gruzia. They were billeted with Hungarian families, and could easily be abducted.

The ship was due to leave on Monday 9 December, but Captain Elizbar Gogitidze claimed there was a Georgian superstition that a ship should not sail on a Monday. This suspicious excuse only added to the anxiety of Australian officials and police.

At 2am, Sándor Heteyi, head of Council of Hungarian Associations in Australia, was woken up by Wilfrid Kent Hughes, chairman of the Olympic organising committee, and two policemen. They feared for the safety of the Hungarian athletes and they asked him to locate those athletes billeted with local Hungarians. Over the next few hours police knocked on doors around Melbourne. Even when they located an athlete, they had to convince him or her they were Australian officials intent on protecting them, not Russians in disguise determined to force them on board the Gruzia.

Most of the athletes returned to the Olympic Village where they were placed in protective custody in the US compound on the aptly named Liberty Parade. All cars arriving and leaving the Village were checked by gatekeepers; armed guards circled the compound and security guards slept in the dormitories. Even the wives of security staff were enlisted to stay with the female athletes. The protective cordon stayed in place until after the Gruzia sailed.

On 10 December the athletes were interviewed at the Village by Australian immigration officials who promised, now the Olympics were over, to quickly process their asylum applications. But if they wanted to go on to the United States to participate in the Freedom Tour, they would require visas from the State Department and this could take considerable time.

Lengthy delays might put the whole operation in jeopardy as athletes might decide to drop the idea of participating in the Freedom Tour. Had they decided to stay in Australia then any propaganda CD hoped to extract by parading the athletes around the US would be lost.

A Pan Am plane had been waiting in San Francisco for the immigration formalities to be completed before it flew to Melbourne to pick up the athletes.

Who paid for the charter flight out of Australia, however, is a mystery.

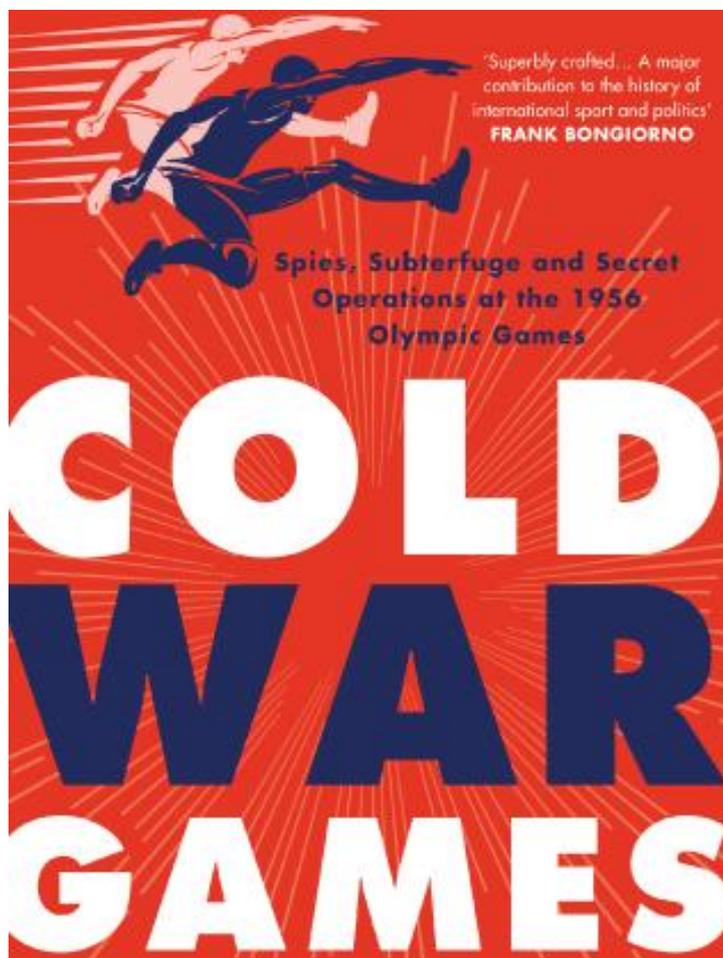
A document from Sports Illustrated disclosed that CD 'scrounged' up a plane, suggesting the head of the airline company, Juan Trippe, had agreed to carry the cost.

This is quite possible as Trippe was involved in a number of private anti-communist groups and it would not be surprising if he was willing to help Operation Griffin. The problem with this explanation is that the rules of the US Civil Aviation Authority made it illegal for Pan Am to offer free flights and, when questioned, its director in the Central Pacific region denied the costs were being covered by Pan Am.

'Someone must be paying for them,' he responded without naming who had picked up the bill. So who was the anonymous benefactor able to cover the cost of the chartered plane, which must have been several thousand dollars? While there is no evidence, the tantalising possibility is that CD used his excellent contacts within the CIA to secure funds for the charter from the pools of black money it did not have to account for.

The plane departed at 2.30pm on 23 December from Melbourne.

This is an edited extract from *Cold War Games: Spies, Subterfuge and Secret Operations at the 1956 Olympic Games* by Harry Blutstein, available from book retailers and online.



 The cover of *Cold War Games* by Harry Blutstein.

