

## Endre Szentkiralyi

### My Parents Fled in 1956

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When I was growing up, it seemed to me that all of my parents' friends had done time in jail in the old country. For political crimes, not theft or burglary. They didn't all do time, of course, it just seemed that way to me, but a majority of them did, and all were discriminated against by the communist authorities in one way or another. I can distinctly remember dinner parties (I must have been ten years old or so) where they discussed Hungarian politics and literature with inserted comments here and there about their own forced-labor camp experiences in Hungary.

My dad, for example, had been a second-class citizen under the communist system because of his family background, and thus was banned from attending college. In fact, he did 15 months time for inciting a weekend work stoppage in his army unit. And my mom told me about how her father had spent a night at the police station, and was only released in the morning when he signed the bottom of a blank sheet of paper; that signature haunted him for years.

#### Growing Up Hungarian in Cleveland

Having fled their homeland in 1956, my parents still maintained a close grip on their heritage, and did their best to give us, their children, a firm grounding in Hungarianness. We spoke only Hungarian at home, they sent us to Hungarian church, we attended Hungarian scouts, and on Monday evenings we went to Hungarian school, just like in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. Actually, that film has many parallels with what it was like growing up Hungarian in Cleveland. And later, when as a teenager I joined the Hungarian dance group, I met other Eastern Europeans at dance festivals and realized that I had much in common with the Ukrainians, Croats, Serbs, Polish, and other nationalities maintaining their heritage in the USA.

#### Our Ethnic Community Leaders

My Sunday-school teachers, scout leaders, and Hungarian school teachers shared some common traits. Whether from the DP generation (Displaced Persons: refugees from WWII) or refugees from 1956, they didn't hold the Soviets in particularly high regard. I once asked my dad why he didn't stay in Germany or Austria or France after he fled Hungary, and his matter-of-fact reply was something like, "son, those Russians overran my country twice in the 20th century; I'd rather have an ocean between us." The people who formed my life, having lived under oppression, appreciated freedom and opportunity more than my American friends, it seemed to me. The literature they had us read and the personal recollections they told us were rife with tales of adversity: getting hauled off to Siberia, government collectivization of family businesses, incarceration for religious activities, these were the anecdotes I heard. My heroes became not so much American baseball players and movie stars, but rather Hungarians like Bishop Vilmos Apor, who helped save Jews during the war and then was killed protecting girls and women from the brutality of occupying Soviet soldiers, or Cardinal Joseph Mindszenty, who was jailed and tortured before 1956, but still maintained his dignity and peaceful resolve. I think the events of 1956 had a lot to do with the way I was raised.

#### My Aunt

In fact, my father's younger sister, Klára, was killed in the fighting on November 4th, 1956. She was 20 at the time, studying to be a nurse, and had been part of a volunteer medical team treating and transporting wounded freedom fighters to hospitals. I later found out she had gotten engaged a day earlier, on November 3rd. Then vicious fighting erupted on Sunday the 4th, and she was tending to the wounded on Üllői street, right near the Corvin movie and the military barracks where Colonel Pál Maléter had been headquartered, when machine gun fire from a tank hit her. The fighting was so fierce that she could not be buried for another

three days, and even then only in a makeshift grave off Rádai street. Then later in the spring-time, when she was given a proper burial, the minister who gave her eulogy, as well as several others from the crowd were arrested going home from the funeral, according to a letter my grandmother wrote from Budapest to my dad. My parents never publicized this story, and only answered questions about it when asked, but I think that merely knowing that my aunt had died in 1956 had given me an extremely personal connection to the events and had made me study and appreciate the events that much more.

### **Conclusion**

Growing up and seeing the grainy black and white photographs of the freedom fighters and Soviet tanks, hearing the experiences of my parents and their friends living in a totalitarian regime, knowing my parents had been there and that 1956 was the reason I was born in America, all these reasons made me consciously choose to keep my Hungarian identity, more so than had my parents come to America for economic reasons. Instead of assimilating into American society as many children of immigrants do, I, my wife, and many of our friends were able to completely fit into American society while nevertheless maintaining a very strong sense of Hungarian identity. We consider ourselves both 100% American and 100% Hungarian. Both cultures, including their historical pasts and everyday ways of thinking and acting, have influenced us and in fact are integral parts of our identity, and I believe that the events of 1956 caused this strong tie, a bond so strong I wish to pass it on to my own children. And when events of fifty years ago cause someone to impart a certain set of values to people two generations remote, that adds significance to the events of 1956.

### ***Endre Szentkiralyi***

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