

## Ildikó diósadi Bodó Gajda

### **The Road to Freedom**

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I was getting ready for school the morning of October 24, 1956, when my Grandmother informed me that school had been canceled due to fighting in the streets. The Hungarian Revolution started the night before. Although I was not sure exactly what was going on, the fact that there was no school was wonderful news to any 13 year-old. In fact there was no school for a long time. At this point, Bulcsú Street, where I lived, was quiet.

A few days later, I joined two of my friends in our apartment building and went door to door asking for money and books that we could take to the freedom fighters in the hospital. My friends knew a nurse, who felt that the young people in the hospital would really appreciate this gesture. After collecting all the money, we went to the tobacco store to buy cigarettes. However, since we could only buy 2 packs ourselves, we stood outside the store and asked passersby to go in and buy the cigarettes with our money. The three of us finally made it to the hospital and visited the men's ward.

I met one young man who told me that he would not be there when we planned to return in a couple of days for a second visit. He wanted to make sure that he would be discharged from the hospital even before he was fully recovered to continue the fight against the Russians. He was accomplishing this by taking the thermometer out of his mouth early so it showed that he did not have a fever. Due to the lack of space in the hospital and this clever trick, he was indeed discharged before our return. The saddest part of the visit was when a woman came in to say goodbye. She was very bubbly and happy because she was going home. However, we noticed that the whole room became quiet and did not seem to join in her happiness. After she left the room, we were told that she was so happy because she thought she was going home to her family, especially her husband. Unfortunately, when she was shot in the beginning of the Revolution, she did not remember that her husband had died in her arms. No one had the courage to tell her the truth.

### **Soldiers in our neighborhood**

Although the section of town where I lived was really out of the mainstream of fighting, we did have two incidents. One was when a Russian tank ran up on the sidewalk and the soldiers inside the tank were too afraid to come out. Although, the soldiers did eventually come out of the tank and were not harmed, I wasn't allowed to get too close. But, it was very exciting to witness for a few hours. The second incident happened when the soldiers performed a door-to-door search of all the apartments, looking for guns. Anyone caught with a gun was arrested. However, before they got to our apartment, some freedom fighters showed up and engaged in a gun battle right under our window. We ended up in the basement bunker for safety.

Both of my parents were out of town when the Revolution started. It was over a week before they were able to return to Budapest because public transportation was stopped all across the country. As soon as they arrived, my activities were further curtailed and I was unable to visit even the hospital during the day. I did eventually talk my Mother into taking me downtown so I could see what destruction had taken place. I saw apartment buildings reduced to complete rubble with rooms just broken in half. In part of one building that I saw, half the structure was blown apart, yet the dining room table was still standing untouched with cups still intact. There I saw my first dead person, in one of the doorways, with flowers on his chest.

Life in Budapest during the Revolution was pretty difficult. Getting food was not easy. Fortunately, we did have an open market across the street from our apartment, but meat and bread were still difficult to get. I remember spending many hours standing in bread lines, which was scary, because once in a while people were shot and killed in these lines.

## **Escape**

My parents discussed the idea of leaving the country, especially after Sunday, November 4th, when the Russians re-took Hungary. My parents wanted to escape in as safe a manner as possible. My Father came home on November 24th from his place of employment, where he had found a ride to the border with some co-workers. We had to leave almost immediately. I remember my excitement at this new adventure. I put on several layers of clothing, since we could not be seen leaving the apartment with suitcases. My Mother packed some sausage and bread in a briefcase. That is all we took with us.

After a tearful goodbye to some of our relatives on November 24th, we departed on foot, since there was still no public transportation running. First, we had to make our way to a square in Buda to meet my Father's co-workers. The driver had permission from the government to take a truck to the border to find missing trucks from the company that other workers had used to transport their own families to the border. Our truck was packed, since there were seven people in the cab, and three men including my Father in the back of the truck. Since we knew that we would be going through police checkpoints, everyone was given a job, position and reason for being in the truck. My Mother and I were being taken to "relatives" close to the border. The eight other men in the truck were either truck drivers or mechanics.

## **Driving to Austria**

As we drove along, three trucks suddenly passed us from the same company. Our driver knew who was in the other trucks, and also knew that the men had driven to the border, checked it out for ease of crossing then driven back to Budapest to pick up their families. This was a Godsend to us since we had no idea where we would cross. This was obviously scary because soldiers could shoot you or police could arrest you if you tried to cross in the wrong place. So, we decided to follow these three trucks, but they had other ideas. They felt that four trucks from the same company was a caravan, and it would attract too much attention. I wonder why three were less conspicuous? So, our game began.

We would drive way ahead of them until we were not sure which way to go. At that point, we would slow down until they caught up to us, and would have to pass us. We continued this all afternoon and into the night. As we arrived into a little village around midnight, we were told that we better stay there until morning, since between the village and the border there was a Russian tank checkpoint and in the dark, they may shoot after us. All the women and children were housed in local peoples' homes. However, by the time we arrived in the village, we could not find anyone awake who could have give my Mother and me a bed to sleep in. We ended up spending the night in a greenhouse on the seat of the truck.

The next morning we were up early, and by 6 a.m. were driving the short distance to the border. Since we were not really sure which way to go, we let the other trucks lead the way again. Although we were the only ones with legal papers, the driver of the first truck gave vodka, bacon and money to the soldiers at the checkpoint. After that, they never checked the other trucks, but just waved us on. Once we had driven as far as we could go, to our surprise, we found three more trucks from the same company, abandoned close to the border. From here, we had to go by foot, since it wasn't very far to the border.

There was a deep creek between Austria and Hungary, but one enterprising man had a chain stretched between the two countries and was taking people across in a little boat. It was like a movie scene, where people came from all different directions to get to Austria. The man's pocket was bulging with money from all the people who were using his services. We had the scare of our lives during our boat trip. A dredge boat floated nearby the chain, with a young Hungarian soldier sitting on top watching everyone leave. In his boredom he decided to shoot into the air, just about giving everyone a heart attack. He was told in no uncertain terms to stop shooting immediately. We finally made it to the boat and soon found ourselves in Austria. We were free.

## **Life as a refugee**

The village was some distance from the border, but the kind Austrians sent out tractors to take people into the center of the village. There were so many of us that we could not all fit on the bed of the tractor, until it made a return trip. Once in the village, the Austrian people paired us with families to be fed. We did manage to go into a church to give thanks to God for our safe journey, but had to be back at the train station by nightfall. Once there, we were all loaded onto a train, with eight people in our compartment. That night there was no supper or any other amenities at all. In fact, being November, it was pretty cold with no heat on the train.

The train stayed in the station until it was completely filled. Then we started a two-day trip, while authorities tried to find a camp where they could lodge a whole trainload of Hungarians. During this time, the only food we had was the sausage and bread that my Mother packed in the brief case at the start of our journey. We shared it with our companions.

Finally the authorities opened a new camp at Kaisersteinbruck, since all the others were full. It was really great to get off the train. Since this was a new campsite, most of the barracks did not even have beds in them. All they had time to do was lay down straw on both sides of the room and give everyone two blankets. Families made small pathways in the straw to be together, but there was no privacy, since all ages and sexes were housed in this huge room. After spending over three days in the same clothes, it was great to take a shower, even though the water was cold. Food was brought into the room in very large kettles and dished out. There was a Red Cross used clothing store where we went since I had a hole in my shoes. The people working in the store did not speak Hungarian, and most Hungarians did not speak German, so they were thrilled to find my parents who both spoke good German. They both got a job working in the store. Even though there was no salary, they were happy to be able to help fellow Hungarians in need. That was enough.

The time in the camp went by very slowly since there were not many recreational activities. Although, we were not allowed to leave the camp area unless we were going to Vienna on official business, we did make a number of trips to Vienna to apply at the American Legation to be able to get into the United States. On one of our trips my Father sold his warm winter coat, so we could have a few shillings to spend.

Our name was finally called out over the loud speaker on December 26th. We packed what little we had accumulated from the Red Cross, and reported to the bus. There were four buses loaded with Hungarians who were being driven to the American army base in Munich, Germany. It was close to midnight when we finally arrived. The base was not equipped to handle whole families, so the men were lodged in the men's barracks and the women separately. Eventually, we were all loaded onto an army plane to be flown to America. How we were lucky enough to be sent on a plane was a mystery to us. Since families with small children and the elderly had a chance to fly, the rest of the people came by boat. We did stop in the Azores Islands and Bermuda before arriving at McGuire Air Force base in New Jersey.

### **Arriving in the United States**

After we arrived at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, we were first housed in the small camp, where they did all the paper work. This was a slow process. Once all paper work and physicals were finished, we were moved to the large camp across the street. From this camp, people could leave if they had relatives, a job or a sponsoring organization. We had none of these. Fortunately my Father found that the Council of Churches of Wilmington, Delaware was looking to sponsor three families. To our joy, we were one of the families chosen! So on January 31, 1957, we arrived in Wilmington to live with a DuPont chemist and his family.

After living with the DuPont chemist and his family for about six weeks, some wonderful person offered eight apartments to Hungarians for \$1/month rent for the first four months, after which time the rent was \$45/month. Of course, we had no furniture at all, but some kind strangers were able to find all sort of used items for us. It was heaven for us, since this was the first apartment that my parents had which they did not have to share with other relatives since the end of the war.

My Mother found a job with DuPont Company, first as a temporary worker and then a permanent position. My Father eventually found a job with Wilmington Trust Company, where he became an auditor. I initially was enrolled at a local Catholic elementary school, but because I could not speak English, I was sent for a year and a half to a boarding school run by the Benedictine order in Ridgely, Maryland. After returning to Wilmington, I was enrolled at St. Elizabeth High School and graduated in 1962.

### ***Ildikó diósadi Bodó Gajda***

*Ildikó Gajda graduated in 1966 from the University of Delaware where she received a B.S. degree. She married her husband in 1968, who was also attending the University of Delaware, where he received his Ph.D. in chemical engineering. Until 1994, they lived in Wilmington at which time her husband was transferred to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where they live today. Gajda has two wonderful children and two beautiful granddaughters. Dr. Miklós and Mária Hitter are the Grandparents of Ildikó Gajda.*