

John S. Kőrössy Jr.

A Hungarian in Heart and Spirit

My name is John S. Kőrössy Jr. I am 62 years old, and reside in Kirtland Hills, OH. I was born and raised in Budapest, Hungary, and at the time of the 1956 revolution we lived in the XIth district (kerület) of Budapest in the Lágymányos area of Buda. As a fourteen year old I was in the 6th grade of the grammar school located just off from Móricz Zsigmond Square.

In the early hours and days of the revolution life moved on as usual; not much reached down to the level of a fourteen year old. All or most of the events were going on across the Danube on the other side of town. Before long word of mouth information started to spread like wildfire concerning the demonstrations, the occupation of the radio station and the soon to become evident violence. My mother reacted in full demonstration of motherly love and concern: I was pretty much locked in, and nearly completely unable to join the groups of people who were discussing the events of the day on the street. Soon the situation changed, and my family participated in our new and much welcomed freedom in sharing all the news of hope and anticipation which by this time was all over the city. I very much doubt that I understood the full meaning and impact of the events which had just taken place so recently.

My most distinct memories of personal experiences include walking around on Móricz Zsigmond Square, and looking at the barricades of peeled up blocks of pavement stones which we helped a little to build, the turned over streetcars as they lay on their sides, the various vehicles which were piled up so as to block the five major thoroughfares the intersection of which formed the Square itself. People were walking about while discussing the news of the day; it seemed that everyone knew everyone else. There were a good number of young and older men working on the barricades in the midst of buildings damaged by large caliber gunfire. I remember walking past several stores with broken glass shards where the store window used to be. I wandered in seeing the store window itself full of items originally on display: no one took anything. One particular window with the glass broken out had a fairly good sized wooden box in the middle with the lid open. I will never forget it: the sign explained that the spirit of our revolution permits that money be collected openly for the surviving victims of the secret police brutality. The box was overflowing with money!

This was a strange time. It was a time of incredible violence when all human senses were set aside by the invaders of our country. It was also a time of tolerance and near peaceful coexistence under the cloak of uncertainty and unclear expectations. I remember being out with my friends –about five or six of us– and as we walked around our neighborhood we noticed a parked Russian tank on one of the side streets. The main gun of the tank was elevated so as to appear non-threatening, the turret hatch and gunner's hatch were open, and the tank crew was sitting, lounging, on the deck. So what is more normal for kids, we walked over and started speaking to the friendly-looking crew. All of us had studied Russian for several years by now: one of the benefits of the communist regime. Turned out that they wanted cigarettes. A few of us ran home to get some, and as a reward were permitted to examine the interior of the armored vehicle through the open hatches. I do not remember feeling any sense of fear or concern at the time.

The much darker days which followed late October formed the rest of my experiences. My father had been gone for days, and my mother –strangely enough– while she seemed worried about his absence, and perhaps safety, did not offer any explanations for his absence. I woke up one night to find my father and two other men in our front room. One of the men was wounded, and my mother was bandaging his arm and shoulder. I was not given much of an explanation, but by that time I did not really need any. I was finally permitted to walk around in the nearby city during

the daytime with my uncle, and witnessed an oncoming column of Russian tanks on Bartók Béla Street. We hid safely in a doorway as the tanks rolled by, and saw one of the tanks rotate its turret and fire at point blank range into a large red sign on the wall of a restaurant on the corner of Lágymányosi Street and Bartók Béla Street. The sign was merely advertising the appearance of a certain band in the restaurant. The Russian gunner apparently thought that it contained an element of anti-Soviet propaganda. I dread to think how many victims his senseless act created in that split second. Continuing our journey we once again met with another Russian armored column. I felt safe in hiding behind the massive wooden doors of a nearby apartment house, but my uncle yanked me down the hall and around the stairway. As we waited for the tanks to pass we heard the roar of the turret mounted machine gun, and saw the splintering of wood as the stream of bullets shredded the bottom of the doorway to pieces. It is extremely unlikely that I would be writing these lines if we had stayed behind the doors instead of taking further care to remain safe. Apparently this was just the beginning of our dangerous outing. We were crossing the intersection at Villányi Street as it opens to the Móricz Zsigmond Square and we saw a Russian tank parked in the middle of the intersection. We walked past the tank, and nearly reached the other side of the street when the tank fired its main gun in the direction of an apartment house some mile or so down Villányi Street. The nearside wall of the apartment house was hit, and we could see a gaping hole with smoke and plaster pouring from it. The surprise and terror of the people on the street –ourselves included– was inconsequential in comparison to the extensive damage to the apartment house and likely, the injury to the people within it.

Soon November passed into December, and a sense of helplessness overcame most of us. The nation was alone in the world as it had been so often before. Thoughts and aspirations of escape materialized, and in early December my family started the long journey west. Having taken the train to within about twenty kilometers of the Austrian border we continued our trek on foot. After a night of walking through the deep snow of a silent pine forest, to be startled by an occasional armored car patrol, we reached the edge of the woods. On the far side of the clearing we saw a large group of people and large red crosses painted on banners flapping in the breeze. We were safe. As we drew closer to the shouting and waving crowd and their words became discernible I remember a thought flashing through my mind. I did not understand their words. I realized that we were entering a strange land with a different language, a place where I knew no one, and that this is how it would stay from here on forward. I suddenly felt alone, scared and wanted to go home. But we did not; our westward journey continued, and after enjoying the warm welcome in several refugee camps we eventually arrived in the United States fifty years ago.

Fitting into the American way of life for me at that young age was relatively easy, although not without occasional difficulty. Acquiring the necessary language skills and continuing my disrupted education became the central focus of my life in the coming years.

Along the way I served my new country in the United States Marines. I soon became a US citizen and became exposed to the concepts of human rights, civil liberties, constitutional rights, freedoms of speech and religion; topics which occupy so much of our time and effort in our contemporary society. I have also seen regrettable examples of what can happen when these basic human rights are not accompanied by a sense of responsibility and accountability.

In my view the revolution in 1956 was the final outburst of a nation's demand for the ability to put into its daily life the practice of these esoteric concepts. The failure of that system to recognize and fairly deal with these basic human demands over the span of decades finally erupted into the last resort: violence. The real heroes of the revolution are the men and women who chose to lead the way for all the others to follow. And what following there was! The spirit of the entire nation was forged into one iron fist in a manner only seldom seen, much less experienced, in history and became the guiding spirit of the revolution. The historical message of the revolution is clear and simple. Any attempt by a ruling regime to persistently suppress and curb the God-given rights of a people will sooner or later end in failure. As it surely did in Hungary. I am proud to call myself a Hungarian, and will for the rest of my life take pride in being a son of nation of such courage, determination and will to stand against all odds in its demand for freedom.

Although I have not returned to Hungary since my departure in 1956 I have remained a Hungarian in heart and spirit. I read, write and speak Hungarian fluently and lots of Hungarian books can be found in my house. Born in Erdély, my wife Ildikó and I share this precious her-

itage equally along with our children. I have been, and continue to be active in the Hungarian community in Cleveland and in our Hungarian parish, St. Emeric church. I am president of two active Hungarian organizations: the World Federation of Hungarian Veterans and the United Hungarian Societies while Ildikó serves still another one, the Cleveland Magyar Club, in the same position. Much of our time is devoted to maintaining and sharing with others our heritage, culture and language.

In Cleveland, the United Hungarian Societies have organized the annual memorial commemoration of the Hungarian revolution for upwards of thirty-five to forty years. As president of this organization I am currently busy planning details of our celebration for the current 2005 as well as the upcoming milestone fiftieth anniversary next year.

John S. Kőrössy, Jr.

Director of Engineering at a manufacturer of capital machinery, John S. Kőrössy, Jr. is the president of the Cleveland chapter of the World Federation of Hungarian Veterans. He is also the president of the United Hungarian Societies, an umbrella organization encompassing many of Cleveland's Hungarian churches and civic organizations. Kőrössy currently resides with his family in Kirtland Hills, Ohio.