

Mária Szodfridt

The Story of My Husband: The Terrible Years Before the Revolution

“Szabadságunkat köszönjük nektek, 56-os hősök”

“For Our Freedom We Thank You, Heroes of 1956”

These are the words engraved on the stone monument on the grounds of the Philadelphia & Vicinity Hungarian Sports Club. The Club’s membership dedicated it on the 40th anniversary of the Revolution.

The Club was founded by Hungarian refugees from 1956. It is commonly referred to as the “Magyar Tanya,” or “Hungarian Farm.” It is located on a 120 acre-large piece of land that resembles the hilly, wooded regions of Dunántúl in Hungary. We purchased it for \$20,000, but its value has grown to several million dollars.

We built the Clubhouse out of a ramshackle, abandoned 125 year-old farm house. Next to the building that holds our ballroom and fully equipped kitchen we have a large swimming pool. Every July we hold a big Hungarian Day, which is an important event for East Coast Hungarians, and draws a thousand participants! We have spots for 30 camping trailers with hook-up for water, electricity and sewage. We built all this from sheer willpower, 95% of it with our own hands, and, without a dissenting voice in our midst.

A group of young Hungarians grew up here: we had a Hungarian Scout troupe, a Hungarian School, and a Hungarian dance group. We preserved our heritage. The commemoration of national holidays, March 15, the Heroes’ Day, the 1956 anniversary, etc. are still important and inspiring events for us.

One of the founders of the Magyar Tanya and its president for over 40 years was my husband, József Szodfridt (1922-2003). Through his leadership he played a major role in this organization from its origins in the 1960’s until his death in 2003. He saw this project as his life’s work in America.

One cannot fully appreciate the inspiring stories about the 1956 Revolution, without first learning about the tragic consequences of communist rule on individual lives in Hungary. That is why I would like to share a letter with you that my husband wrote to a good friend and former fellow prisoner who asked him to document his terrible experiences of time spent in Russian and Hungarian prisons between 1945 and 1956. His fate, along with those of thousands of others, was tragically typical of those years. It served as precursor to the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, when even the youth shouted “Enough!”

József’s letter to his friend:

My military rank: I was a 2nd lieutenant. I graduated from Ludovika Academy. On August 20, 1944, they promoted me to artillery lieutenant. I was assigned to a heavy gun artillery brigade, the Sopron #101, and sent to the front in the beginning of September, 1944, as chief officer. In a short time I became squadron commander.

In May, 1945, I was taken prisoner near Wratikau County (Czechoslovakia.) I served time in the Olmutz prisoner of war camp and was one of the few Christians held at Auschwitz. Among the people, it was said that the Germans demolished this place before they retreated. This is a misleading lie! Nothing was demolished there or set on fire. The Russians used it as a prisoner of war transit camp; fifty-three thousand of us were crowded together there, where before us nine thousand had “lived in inhuman conditions.”

Both of the ditches lining the 3km road which led from station to camp were filled with bodies, shot in the head, because the people were so sick they couldn’t keep up the pace. I was lucky,

because two young men from my brigade dragged me the entire three kilometers, even though they, too, could barely walk from hunger and weakness.

I don't even have to tell you how miserable the conditions at the camp were: people were dropping like flies in autumn. I was able to get back on my feet after 12 days in the epidemic hospital, thanks to one of the soldiers from my squadron. At the risk of his life, he climbed up the lightning rod and saved my life with whatever charred bread and tea he could find.

At this epidemic hospital the conditions were indescribable. I was fortunate because they threw me on the highest (third) bunk, so nothing could drip down on me from above. For 12 days I soiled my bed. On the 12th day I got up to go to the latrine, and when the doctor saw me, he released me as healthy.

This is how I ended up in the same transport as the men from my squadron. On the car someone had just died waiting for the engine to arrive, and, as his replacement, I became the last Hungarian to be taken from Auschwitz to Russia.

1947 – Until the fall I was at the Akmolinsk #330 prison of war camp. On October 23rd I arrived in Debrecen.

1947 – In November, I enrolled at the Technical College as a mechanical engineering major.

1949 – From February 3rd I was again in prison. I got involved with the Győr police as well as the ÁVO there. For 53 days I was held for questioning at the Military Police Branch on Bartók Béla Street in Buda. (They were particularly cruel under the bloody András Berkesi and his deputies: They knocked out 8 of my teeth, broke several of my ribs, kicked and destroyed my right kidney, broke my nose, pummeled my genitals, beat my palms and soles of my feet to shreds. They tried to extract a confession from me at any cost!)

After the investigation I spent time in the Margit Street military detention center, the Pest Regional Government detention center, and the Markó Street prison. After my conviction I was sent to the "gyűjtőfogház," a political detention center, where it was my job to "build democracy."

I was a plumber, an electrician, a Russian translator, a smith, a technical draftsman, a locksmith, an engineer, a furnace stoker, a machinist, an electrical and flame welder, a stone mason and a typewriter repairman to name just a few of my jobs. (Knowledge of these skills has served me well to this day.)

1952 – on June 3rd I got in major trouble by being a ringleader in providing cover for the successful escape attempt of Szilárd Karácsony, who reached Austria safely. They kicked apart my sphincter muscles, and beat out my eye (among others). Fortunately, they took me into the ÁVO headquarters for an interrogation, as I probably owe my life to this.

Because of this escape attempt, they demoted the warden, Bánkuti, from major to captain. Out of total rage and retaliation, they beat one of our men (Ferenc Kurucz) to death in front of numerous witnesses from every work brigade. I can imagine that I could have met a similar fate had I not been taken away.

1953 – I ended up in the Csolnok coal mines. There I first worked on the coal wall, and later as an electrician. I gained some new skills, including electro-locksmith and mining equipment operation.

1953 – In December, because of strike organizing I was taken to the Márianosztra penal house, from where I was transported to Várpalota.

1956 – Once again I ended up at Csolnok as a skilled laborer. From there I was released on August 18th and was ordered to report again in February, 1957, to resume serving the rest of my sentence.

During the Revolution I was in Győr under police surveillance, planning my long-awaited wedding.

On November 13th, I received the news that I was again on the list. After a brief conversation with my wife whom I had just married 3 weeks before, we decided to leave the country. We crossed the

Andau Bridge on a November night, on a rainy, muddy road to the unknown, and we succeeded in making it to Austria.

Thinking back on it, fate is so unpredictable: we were most happy when we lost our homes, but won back our freedom!

Mária Szodfridt

Mária Szodfridt was also born in Győr, and attended the College of Physical Education in Budapest. After graduation she returned to Győr, where she taught physical education to high school students for 8 years.

After their arrival in the United States she worked as a quality control laboratory technician at Merck Pharmaceuticals. She taught in the Hungarian School, worked with the Hungarian Scouts, and supported her husband's work at the Magyar Tanya in every possible way. She and József have two children.

József Szodfridt

József Szodfridt was born in Győr in 1922. His university studies in Budapest were interrupted by World War II. After serving 11 years in several communist prisons, in 1956 he escaped with his bride, Kiki, and three close friends and former prison-mates to Eisenstadt, Austria. In April, 1957, after they realized it was hopeless to wait to return to Hungary, the Szodfridts and the group of friends from Győr decided to immigrate to the United States. They started their American life together in Lansdale, Pennsylvania.

József held many jobs, working his way up in each position, first as an electrician, vacuum plater, and plant manager, and finally, as a consultant. In the early 1960's along with others, he began decades of hard work actually building the facilities of the "Magyar Tanya," the "Hungarian Farm." He served as President of the Hungarian Sports Association of Philadelphia for 38 years, until his death in 2003.