

Olga Vallay Szokolay

My October

1956 was a very special year.

In the first few days of January, an early morning streetcar derailed and plunged from the Margit Bridge into the Danube.

A few days later, Budapest was shaken awake at daybreak by the earthquake at the suburb Soroksár.

In February, on leap-year-day, I married Dr. Denis Szokolay. Circumstances of the times did not make it possible for us to have an apartment of our own. We lived separately in rented rooms, either one of them too small for two people. As a budding architect I was already working on the plans for subdividing a nook of a studio we could call our own, hoping we could build it in a year or two.

We both worked. But by fall our circumstances hadn't changed. We grabbed whatever time we could together. Sometimes it meant simply talking to each other from the office phones (we had none at home) or meeting and having dinner together at my parents' apartment. This was not what you would consider typical married life.

On the 23rd of October the news spread like wildfire: there was going to be a demonstration in front of the Parliament where the 16 Point petition, drawn up by students, for human rights and against the Soviet occupation, would be presented. Denis and I agreed to go to the scene with our respective colleagues, and we'd see what would happen.

Along with all the others, (several hundreds of thousands, as it turned out) we went to the Parliament, listened to the reading of the Petition, partook in the cutting out the communist symbols from the middle of the red-white-green Hungarian flag and sang the National Anthem with torches improvised from rolled-up newspapers. From there we went with the crowds to the Bem Memorial – a symbol of events commemorated and sung about by innumerable bards and historians.

I got home, with the unforgettable memory etched in my head, of having participated in the most civilized Revolution of history. Denis came over since we had no phones. We discussed the events of the evening, then he went home.

The next day we showed up at our respective offices but, of course, nobody worked that day. We exchanged news, weighed the events of the evening before, and shared our hopes for the future, just learning that there were already some shootings citywide. That evening, we got together at my place again. We listened to the Voice of America and the BBC in the bathroom, the only room which did not have walls adjacent to neighboring apartments. In order to share information and hope with others who had no means of getting it elsewhere, Denis, reviving his stenographic skills, took notes from the radio reports, as I muffled the typewriter sounds with pillows and typed as many copies with carbon paper as would fit into the machine. I then typed another batch, and then some more until our paper supply ran out.

By the next morning nobody was going to work anymore. I stashed the freshly typed news under my coat, "hiding them into my bosom." Every time I saw a child in the street, I pulled out a batch of the news for him to take home and distribute in his neighborhood. Strangers, who typically walked with heads down, now addressed me jubilantly on the Lánc híd: "Have you heard? The UN troops landed at the Dunántúl!"

Denis met with his friends at Pest. The Smallholders' Party had already started to get organized. They wanted him to run in expected elections on several (city, county, nationwide) tickets. Amidst the shootings and blood-

shed the planning of the future had already begun. A Jewish friend of ours started to work on the founding of a new Christian Democratic Party. By the time the Revolution claimed victory, the interim government reported receipt of 120 applications to start new political parties... The longtime one-party-system had boiled down to a festering head.

The Rebirth of the Smallholder's Party

For the first time in my life, I felt I had a country. The irredentism during my childhood seemed affected, though the re-annexing of parts of historic Hungary, torn away by the post-WW I Trianon pact, brought some genuine hope. But soon that was followed by the German occupation and then, over the ruins, the Soviets took over. Now, in the last days of October, 1956, for the first time, was I a real Hungarian.

During one of the evenings of "victory" Denis brought the news that the Smallholders predicted three possible scenarios for the future:

1. The Soviets withdraw, we'll hold free elections and establish a coalition government which, by geographic necessity, will be of pinkish hue.
2. The Soviet Union would not accept defeat and Hungary turns into a second Korea.
3. The West intervenes and a third world war starts over us.

At this point, the next step became crystal clear to me:

"There is only one conclusion from all this: we have to leave."

The next day news of some withdrawal of Soviet troops started to circulate. Soon, however, the reported movement in the East turned out to be deployment of new troops.

Denis and I agreed: we must not stay in the country.

Yes, leave... But how? We had to find transportation.

That very evening, we visited our friend Tony who had a Jeep. It just so happened that his Austrian wife was on a visit in Vienna. We surmised that he would feel like trying to follow her and we might join him in the Jeep.

He certainly agreed, but only under the condition that both his little daughters could go with Austrian passports. One of the girls had a passport but Tony had to apply for the other daughter's at the consulate the next morning.

At the crack of dawn we rode with him and the girls to the consulate at Rózsadomb.

Two Austrian vehicles were already lined up in front of the building, a pick-up truck and a VW mini-bus. They had delivered food and medications to Budapest and were now waiting for their return papers as well as some passengers. We expected to ride in the Jeep along with the other two vehicles but, considering the autumn chill and the fact that we were all heading to the same destination, I was allowed in the mini-bus along with the other women and children, while the men were directed to the pick-up truck. With the exception of one family and ourselves, all passengers had valid passports. The three-vehicle convoy was ready to leave, Tony's two-year old little girl was sitting in my lap but back at the office, her six-year old sister was denied a passport by the consul! Tony accompanied us in the Jeep with his two little ones to the edge of the City, then, in tears, he turned back, not daring to take the risk.

His wife in Vienna cried hysterically hearing our account of the events. She returned to Hungary and it took the family several years to finally get to freedom together.

Encountering mixed fortune during our attempted escape, Denis and I only met up with each other in Vienna a few days later. Camouflaged as luggage in the mini-bus, I escaped safely over the border the same day we left. Denis was not so lucky. His feet were seen sticking out from under a tarp in the back of the truck. He was dragged out of the truck at the border, jailed overnight and released the next morning. No sooner had he been set loose than he took off for the fields running, never stopping until he reached safety in Austria.

On November 3rd, we thought we were among the last ones to cross the border. At the time we couldn't possibly have dreamt that we were the beginning of the Hungarian mass migration of the twentieth century.

Postscript

Many years later, in the '90's, the then commodore of our yacht club was trying to be friendly, and told me that he was born in Austria but had lived in Budapest in the '50's.

His Father was the Austrian consul in Budapest... I never spoke to him again.

Olga Vallay Szokolay

Olga Vallay Szokolay is an architect and educator. She graduated from both the Polytechnical University of Budapest and the University of Bridgeport, Connecticut, and served as Professor emerita at the Norwalk Community College. Since her retirement in 2003, she has focused solely on her architectural practice. Szokolay escaped from Hungary in 1956 with her husband, Dr. Denis T. Szokolay, who died in 2000. She currently resides in Redding, Connecticut, and has two daughters and two grandchildren.