

## Réka Pigniczky

### JOURNEY HOME: A Film About My Father

---

Whenever the kids at school teased us about our funny names and our parents' accents, we shot back: "Leave me alone, my dad was a freedom fighter." That shut them up, at least for a while. My sister and I want our children to inherit this attitude and to know their grandfather's story; but I need to know what's fact and what's fiction.

The story of his past in Hungary is not a straightforward one, mainly because he was the only one telling it, at least while we were growing up in the U.S. He also had quite a dramatic flare; he was known to exaggerate a story for effect, and his approach to names, dates and specific detail was liberal, to say the least. He was entertaining, and when you're funny, specifics bog you down. Children loved him, but as an adult you were never quite sure how much of the facts he was embellishing.

The painful reality behind our film project was just this: if you subtract the intriguing anecdotes and heroic slogans of my father's '56 story, we had no idea what he did, exactly. Now that's pretty disturbing for a journalist who wants to write her father's story. I mean, I've always believed him, and my sister has always believed him-in fact my mother has always believed him even though she divorced him over 25 years ago - but that's not a reliable account to tell my own children, who are already asking questions, and the oldest is not even four.

While other '56ers have written memoirs about what happened and what they did - all very heroic or tragic or both -, my dad, whom everyone respected as a legitimate '56er' in our community, never really spoke in detail (out of fear for those he left in Hungary and because it just wasn't his style) and never published a word. And by the time I became a journalist and realized one of the biggest stories lurking in my neighborhood could be my own dad, he was diagnosed with cancer in 2002. He passed away within 6 months, not living long enough to see my second daughter and my sister Eszti's fourth being born - never mind getting his '56 story down on paper or film. He left this world so suddenly, and so early at age 73, that his personal belongings, his life, his thoughts, pictures, and his story were left in total disarray. And so were we.

That is why I am making a film about my father and his involvement in the events of 1956. Our goal is to find whatever threads of memory remain from the files, letters and photographs that turned up after his death and to find out what we can in Hungary, about what he might have done to have to flee his home so permanently. And what he, as a spontaneous participant in '56 history, might have seen that compelled him to reinforce that message in us throughout his life.

As for us, his daughters, our upbringing in the U.S. can be characterized as a Hungarian incubator: the idea was that once the Soviets pulled out of Hungary, we could move "back" and continue our lives with minimal upheaval. The '56 stories were part and parcel of a very determined and consistent effort by our parents, and by an entire like-minded émigré Hungarian community, to raise us as children of '56-ers, children of refugees, Hungarian boy and girl scouts living in the U.S. My father, Pige, was, of course, a key figure in our upbringing, together with my mother, who also escaped Hungary as a teenager in 1956; they were leaders in the community.

So this journey of making a film can't just be about our father; it is also about us: those of us whose parents left Hungary in 1956, and who therefore grew up not in Hungary, but in some other country. After the tragic crushing of the revolution, more than 200,000 people left Hungary, many of them -

like our father - with no other choice but to leave or face reprisal. Beginning in the 1990's, many of our generation, young people in our 20's and 30's, "returned" to Hungary (where we had never lived). Many of us "commute," but others have settled down in Hungary, some with a Hungarian spouse. Why are we coming "back," why are we making a (second) home here? Who are we, and why is it that sometimes our own children speak only Hungarian? Why do more of my Hungarian-American friends live in Hungary than in the States? Are they here for economic reasons, or due to some unexplainable "homesickness?" And what does all this have to do with 1956?

If he were still here, I know what my father would say about this documentary and about my musings in general: "Reka: if you listen to me, you'll do whatever you please." - that's what he always said. We always knew that he loved and supported us, but he wasn't focused on his own legend, and ultimately, the follow-up and follow-through were not his style either. He was more dramatic in deeds than words, more action than armchair intellectualizing. He was the type who woke up in the middle of the night, mid-sleep, kneeling by the side of his bed, shooting over his mattress at the enemy. He taught us to do the same, in real life, if and when necessary. His message, minus the details of his own role, was loud and clear: when someone takes your freedom away and humiliates your nation, you don't sit by idly. You act.

And as I have found in making this documentary film, the stories that Pige told us, his daughters, were not, in fact, embellished. When my sister and I searched for his name in the Secret Service Archives in Budapest and found people who knew him in those October days, we found verification for almost every single thing he told us. As it turns out, in fact, he was modest about his deeds and his fear of going back to Hungary was well-founded. He was, in fact, one of the leaders of a group of freedom fighters in the Budapest's 7th district - and that out of the seven or so leaders, three fled to the West after the revolution and four were hanged in 1958.

### ***Réka Pigniczky***

*Réka is a television journalist and producer who has worked for the Associated Press for nearly 8 years, mostly in New York City. Before moving to New York, she lived in Budapest from 1992-1996, working as a consultant for a Hungarian political party. She also helped organize and manage new women's NGO's that sprang to life after the political transition to democracy in the early 1990's. She has an MA in journalism and international relations from Columbia University and an MA in political science from the Central European University in Budapest. She's currently based in Budapest, Hungary, where she freelances for the AP and other broadcasters, although making the film Journey Home is taking up most of her time. The film will premiere in 2006. To read more about Journey Home, see [www.56films.com](http://www.56films.com).*