

## Andrea Lauer Rice

### Passing on the Legacy of 1956

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Although I always knew that I was Hungarian – my family traveled back to Hungary every two years or so after I was born – I only really came into my Hungarian identity, the true spirit of it, much later in life. It is the same with the legacy of 1956. While I cannot recall the first time I heard the story of 1956, I always remember being aware of it and proud of my family's role in it. But it is only within the past decade or so that I began to dig deeper into the details of that fateful time in the country's history and how it influenced my family's life. Now, in retrospect, I not only see the signs of what my family members went through then and how it affected them, but I can also see how their life lessons from '56 have had a profound effect on me.

I now recognize many things in my childhood that made my family different from the families of my friends. Nothing was ever wasted. Everything we had was savored and appreciated. For example, we were always required to clean our plate, not because of the common refrain "there are starving children in Africa," but because my Mother knew what it was like to exist on bread, lard, and cream of wheat for weeks at a time.

My Grandparents were adamant that we finish not just college but have advanced degrees, because they knew the power and freedom an education could provide throughout one's life. It was due to their education that they were able to start new lives when they arrived in the United States. in their late forties. Awareness of world affairs was another expectation in my home. And, when we came of age, it was understood that voting was a sacred duty, because they knew what it was like when your vote made no difference at all. My Aunt always inspired creativity and artistic expression in us, because as an artist who grew up under the repressive communist system, she knew all too well what stifling these freedoms meant to a creative soul.

My Grandparents, who lost everything they owned, not once but twice, now hold onto everything. It is a running joke that we need to do spring cleaning at their apartment, but are afraid what we will find from Christmases past. And finally, my Mother, who is extremely conservative in spending, will always say after a large purchase, "do you know we could restore a Hungarian church with this amount?" or "do you know how many scholarships for Hungarian students could be funded with this in Transylvania?"

Over the years, as I grew closer to my Hungarian friends and learned the stories of my extended family members, I saw firsthand the injustice and untold suffering caused by communism. One of the most poignant stories is from a distant relative who in 1945, was babysitting her young niece when some Soviet soldiers got drunk and began to rampage through the town where she lived. They soon came to her house looking for "the little girl." My relative quickly hid the girl in a kitchen cabinet and bravely met the soldiers at the door. One can only imagine what happened afterwards, but the girl was left untouched...

After moving to Budapest in 1990, I began to delve into the story and legacy of the Revolution of 1956. As I learned the details, I suddenly understood much more about my family's role, their reason for leaving Hungary, and the historical significance of the Revolution. In 1991, when I attended the second ever, free commemoration of October 23, 1956, I was unbelievably moved. I remember vividly the large tricolor flag with a gaping hole cut out, draped across the Parliament steps, the hundreds of candles people lit and the small flags they held. I remember hearing bits and pieces of stories being told as I passed through the crowd. And most of all, I remember one elderly gentleman sitting on the steps with his grandson in his lap, quietly telling him the story of 1956 with tears streaming down his face. I recall a feeling of deep pride at being a part of this nation, of what Hungarians stood for, and the small but significant role my family played in the 1956 events. As I lit candles in honor of each family member who participated in the 1956 Revolution, I

made a solemn promise to myself to do my part in making sure this story was never forgotten. And now, 15 years later, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary, I feel that Hungarian-Americans have the opportunity and indeed the obligation to ensure that the story of 1956 continues to be widely shared. This is the inspiration behind the creation of the FreedomFighter56.com website and oral history project.

### **The Revolution**

At its core, the Revolution was started by university students, who had had enough of communist oppression and demanded certain freedoms and reforms. Soon, the entire country responded to their call, including factory workers, who were expected to stay loyal to the communist leadership. Everyone was involved, from children to the elderly, and every possible tool was employed by the largely unarmed and unprepared Hungarian people. There are wonderful stories of resourceful children spreading jam on the windows of tanks or turning soup bowls over in the street to look like mines. Apparently, the soup bowl trick would lure tank commanders out to take a look and the kids, who were waiting in the doorways framing the road, would throw a Molotov cocktail into the tank to disable it. I just recently learned that the Russians sent in 2,000 tanks to reclaim Budapest on November 4th. This was the same number of tanks Hitler sent into France (a country seven times the size) to take the entire country. Imagine, at its most dramatic moment, tanks fighting against kids with jam and soup bowls!

Yet somehow, Hungary managed to bring the Soviet Union to its knees for nearly two weeks... 13 days of freedom. When the Revolution was crushed, it was ended with such brutal force that it laid bare the lie of communism and pulled back the curtain on what the Soviets were trying to present to the world as a desirable political system for the people. Communist sympathizers all over then Western Europe – in France, Italy and England – finally saw the true face of communism with its cruelties and injustices. Years later the world would realize that this was the first nail in the coffin of communism in the region. It was the beginning of the end.

### **Hungarian-American pride/passing the story on...**

My Mother has told me on several occasions that Hungarian emigrés who settled in the United States didn't necessarily want to talk about the Revolution; they had to talk about it, to discuss what they had gone through, and its effect on their new life in a new country. While Hungarian-Americans who left in '56 held the flame of freedom high, it was quite a different situation for those who stayed in Hungary. There were years of reprisals – trials, imprisonment and executions – against those who were identified as freedom fighters. There was also silence imposed on the subject so that people could not talk about it, be taught about it, or commemorate it under the communist system. This is one of the main reasons, I believe, that Hungarian-Americans are so proud of what Hungarians accomplished 50 years ago, while Hungarians in Hungary seem ambivalent and much less certain how and what to commemorate this year.

A recent article in the Wall Street Journal stated, "A sense of family history is linked to self-esteem and resiliency in kids... stories of grappling with sad or difficult events may give children the wisdom and perspective they need to thrive." It went on to say that, "children gain a sense of self in relation to other family members and to the past, building confidence." I would also add that this builds pride and helps create identity.

The Freedom Fighter 56 oral history project and website is about passing on not only the stories, but also the very spirit of the Revolution to future generations. It is about providing an apolitical forum for people to share their stories and talk about how the Revolution influenced them 50 years later. It is a place to feel proud of all that '56-ers accomplished. It is a place to encourage family members to add their individual stories to be part of the great tapestry of history, so we can begin to understand how the lessons of '56 have been passed on to the children, grandchildren and spouses of freedom fighters. It is a place to answer the question 50 years after the fact: "What is the legacy of 1956 in the Hungarian-American community?"

### **My family story of 1956**

My Grandmother (Nagymami) worked in a pharmacy on Móricz Zsigmond Körtér. My Grandfather (Nagyapí) worked at the Nemzeti (National) Bank. My Mother was 14, my Aunt 17, and they all lived just off the Körtér. On October 23, 1956, my Mother and Aunt were walking home from school when, like so many others, they were suddenly swept up in the demonstrations, which ended in the huge crowd in front of the Parliament. It was the beginning of the Revolution. In a few days, as the Revolution intensified throughout the country, my Mother and Aunt took on a more active role by gathering papers and groceries for the neighborhood, and

digging up cobblestones to make barricades for the tanks, delivering messages, gathering news and collecting bottles and alcohol from the pharmacy supply to help freedom fighters make Molotov cocktails.

My Grandfather always told me that when he heard the first reports of the Revolution, he tipped his hat to his co-workers and walked home to the Körtér, where he joined others to build barricades of cobblestones, high enough to stop or at least slow down the Russian tanks. My Grandmother continued to work at the pharmacy, even though she was the only one who remained and most of the store windows had been shattered by fighting. She later set up a makeshift hospital room in the back of the pharmacy to tend to wounded freedom fighters.

Hearing these stories and imagining my Grandmother and Grandfather being in the center of the conflict shaped my commitment to keeping the memory of this extraordinary event alive. These are my images of the Revolution, along with the familiar photos we have all seen. But there are other stories that I have heard that also left an indelible mark on me. For example, one afternoon, my Grandmother watched a young farmer walk across the Körtér through the blown out windows in her pharmacy. The young man carried farm tools over his shoulder and without any fanfare, walked straight to the district administration building on the Körtér that held the hated communist red star. Using his tools, he climbed up the side of the building and worked diligently to free the supports of the star. By the time he had finished, a crowd was gathered and shouting their support. As the star finally came free, the young man became entangled in one of the support wires, and was dragged to his death along with the symbol he so despised.

In late November 1956, after the Russians crushed the Revolution, my family made the wrenching decision to leave Hungary. Following a frightening escape and stays at several refugee camps, they settled in Maryland, close to Washington, D.C. I have often heard the stories of what it was like to start their new life here, not speaking the language and having very limited resources.

My Grandfather, who held a law degree, got a job at Sears as a lamp salesman. My Grandmother, a fully trained pharmacist, found a job washing test-tubes at a local medical lab and was later promoted to prepping monkey brains for lab work. My Mother, who knew very little English, went to high school where she was teased for wearing the same two outfits over and over again. My Aunt married the man who helped my family escape.

Not only did the Kiss family survive, they lived the true American dream, while at the same time honoring and never forgetting their Hungarian roots. In doing so, they passed on the lessons of history – of their proud Hungarian heritage, of the hardships endured during communism, and of the spirit of 1956 – to their children and grandchildren. I pledge to continue the tradition they set in motion, by passing on these same lessons and stories to my own children. If all children and grandchildren of '56-ers commit to this, the legacy of the Revolution will live on: the courage and sacrifices of the freedom fighters of Hungary will never be forgotten.

### ***Andrea Lauer Rice***

*Andrea Lauer Rice is the founder and CEO of Lauer Learning, a multimedia educational company that creates innovative ways to teach kids about foreign languages, historic events and culture. It is also the sponsoring organization behind the FreedomFighter56.com oral history project, publisher of the "56 Stories" book and developer of the "FF56!" educational computer game for teens about the Revolution of 1956. She is a proud Hungarian-American and an even prouder child and grandchild of '56-ers. The Mother of a 3-year-old, she is also working on ways to help parents raise their children bilingually. She lives with her husband Barton in Roswell, Georgia.*

*Andrea Lauer Rice is the daughter of Edith Lauer.*