

Kathy A. Megyeri

## The Effects of '56 on an American Spouse

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As the wife of a Hungarian freedom fighter, 1956 has had a profound impact on my own life. Since Budapest has been our yearly destination for as long as I can remember, I've become more immersed in that event than many others. Two things always strike me when we return. First, there's a commonality established when we are introduced to others, and they ask my husband, "So, are you a '56-er?" Right away, he is identified as (a) one of those Hungarian political activists who no doubt had to flee the country, and (b) in his mid-60's now, which he is. With the planned celebrations scheduled for this year to commemorate the event, it seems as though many are ready to jump on the bandwagon and claim they were in Budapest in '56 or were closely aligned with someone who was. In other words, it's truly a badge of honor now to be a '56-er.

Then too, I'm always reminded of my age when I hear others speak of the event. Recently, I heard Hungarian Ambassador to the United States, András Simonyi, speak of the debt the country owes to the '56 freedom fighters. The passion with which he spoke of the event brought an enthusiastic applause from the Capitol Hill crowd whom he was addressing. I had to remind myself, however, that he was only four years old in 1956, and still, that pivotal event meant as much to him as to most of the many listeners who felt such gratitude for his thanks and praise.

### My husband

Granted, my husband's story is probably not all that different from so many others. After experiencing the events of 1956 as a 15-year-old, he came to America and found freedom and happiness, still remaining bound to Hungarian language, culture, and traditions. Even though almost fifty years have elapsed, that Hungarian freedom fighter, my husband, is still alive and strong. His commitment to freedom has grown after serving thirty years in the U.S. Army, where he attained the rank of Colonel, and after working most of his career in the U.S. House of Representatives as an attorney for the Judiciary Committee.

Our yearly trek back to Hungary and particularly Budapest really commemorates in some small way my husband's early years and his reason for leaving the country he so loves. But my own story needs to be told as well, especially the reasons why 1956 means something to me, an American spouse. First, I'd read James A. Michener's *"The Bridge at Andau,"* an engrossing tale of that pivotal time. The book relates, it's four o'clock on the morning of Sunday, November 4th, 1956, when the city of Budapest is awakened by the sounds of invading Russian tanks, and their previous ten brief, glorious days of freedom that might have yielded a different future has abruptly ended. However, some people know that if they can reach the bridge at Andau, on the Austrian border, they might escape to freedom. This book is a documentary account of that Hungarian revolt against the communists in 1956, and is virulently anti-Russian. Some consider this true story by Michener to be his finest work, and in a New York Times book review, John MacCormac wrote, "Insofar as he has limited himself to describing actual events, Michener has performed a service for which today's historians may be grateful, but today's readers will be even more grateful now." This book was my first introduction to a far-away event that I would someday view more intimately.

After meeting and marrying my husband, we began our regular trips to Budapest to visit family and friends. Invariably, we walked past the Kilián Barracks, where major fighting occurred, and where Pál Maléter, the first Deputy of Defense and later Brigadier General was commander. He, along with Imre Nagy, was executed in 1958. On one visit, my husband's Mother produced his old red kerchief, a remnant of his days as a Pioneer, when as a youth he played chess and constructed model airplanes while he and his little friends were being indoctrinated about the "benefits" of communism. His Mother also produced an old worn copy of

*Szabad Nép*, the communist political daily, and in 1956, the party's central newspaper. My husband's Father had to attend "the *Szabad Nép* half hours," where important articles were discussed for propaganda purposes. The only other little souvenir which my husband brought with him out of the country is the Hungarian flag he carried while demonstrating; it now hangs over the door in his office at the Kossuth House in Washington, D.C. On still another visit, we traveled to Debrecen to see where the Secret Police first opened lethal fire on unarmed demonstrators.

Personally, I can also remember from my early visits to Hungary in the late '60's that people so frequently whispered to each other, a hold-over habit from the days when citizens were forced to celebrate November 7th, the day of the Bolshevik take-over, and April 4th, the "Day of Liberation." Those who did not show sufficient enthusiasm were promptly denounced by the informers; so people whispered because they lived in constant fear that their conversations were being intercepted. One of the joys of my more recent visits is that instead of whispering to each other, normal conversations can take place as confidence and optimism replaces fear and suspicion.

### **Visiting historic sites of 1956**

A couple of years ago, at a Hungarian dinner in Cleveland, I was pleased to be seated next to Gergely Pongráz, a name many remember from his leadership of the armed insurgent group at Corvin Cinema during the Revolution. He left the country in November of '56 but returned to live in Hungary in 1991, where he passed away on May 18th of this year. Meeting him made an impact on me because I remember walking down Üllői út, the street leading to Kispest and passing the Corvin Cinema.

My husband and I have repeatedly toured Parliament, and he always shows me the place where the Secret Police fired on him and other peaceful demonstrators, some of whom were killed. We also walk past the Radio building, where during the evening of October 23 students demanded that their declaration of 16 Points be read, and where police fired upon the crowd. As we continue walking on the Pest side of the Danube, close to the New York Café, we usually tour the National Museum where I vividly remember seeing the Hungarian crown on display before it was moved to the Parliament building. And then we cross to the Buda side to see the Bem Statute of the Polish General from 1848. At this point, my husband recalls that he and other Hungarian students went there to show their support for the Polish freedom movement. One of my favorite sites lies outside Budapest in Statuary Park which is a graveyard for the old communist statues that used to line the city streets. The old Stalin statue which was pulled down from Heroes' Square during the Revolution now stands lonely, damaged, and abandoned in Statuary Park, a fitting end for such a feared and hated symbol.

Of course, no visit is complete without traveling to Esztergom to see the Basilica where Cardinal Mindszenty is buried. Last December, we visited the U.S. Embassy and were escorted into then-U.S. Ambassador Walker's main office in the Szabadság Square building. It was important for us both to see this room, since for 15 years, Cardinal Mindszenty took refuge here in self-imposed confinement. In 1971, under pressure from the Holy See and the Hungarian government, Cardinal Mindszenty consented to leave Hungary. During that time, he visited St. Stephen's church in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and my husband drove to see and hear him at a special mass. Four years later, he died, and his ashes lie in the Esztergom Basilica. However, it wasn't until August of 1991, when Pope John Paul II visited Hungary, that the real end of forty years of religious persecution was symbolized.

I recall two other special moments that affected me and rekindled an affirmation of the impact of 1956. When we visited the Reagan Library one year, I noted a large portrait at the bottom of the central stairwell that depicted the Hungarian Revolution. In the center of that painting is pictured László Pásztor, a political prisoner who was freed in '56, who came to America and served in the Nixon White House. On another such visit to Hungary, we had dinner at the Biarritz Restaurant, next to Parliament, and seated next to us, with only one security person, was then Prime Minister Viktor Orban. When I approached his table to personally thank him for his support of the Terror Háza Museum, he was gracious enough to allow me to photograph him. My access to a Prime Minister seated in a public restaurant and available to speak to an inquisitive tourist like me, I found particularly notable since I'm used to the intense, high level security of Washington, D.C.

During my last visit to Hungary, I spent three days discovering and photographing the finest cemetery art and statuary I've ever seen. Section 21 of the Kerepesi Cemetery holds the remains of Pál Maléter and János

Kádár, Hungary's Prime Minister. Parcel 21 reminds visitors of the impact of the Revolution in sheer numbers: 20,000 were wounded, 2,000 in Budapest alone; 200,000 left the country and the Soviets arrested 5,000, 860 of whom were carried off by the KGB to the Soviet Union as prisoners of war. Of those, a number were under-age boys and girls; 15,000 people were arrested, and 229 were executed with the help of Soviet advisors. Also not to be missed on the cemetery grounds is a fine museum dedicated to preserving the funerary traditions of Hungary.

### **A memorial museum**

But without a doubt, it is the Terror Háza (House of Terror) at Andrásy út 60 that most draws us back each visit and holds our attention. Formerly the headquarters of both the Nazi and, later, the communist Secret Police, the museum commemorates the victims and reminds us of the dreadful acts of terror that occurred in twentieth century Hungary. In these days of worldwide terrorism and fear the museum sends a truly important message to the rest of the world. In the cellar of the Terror Háza is the reconstructed subterranean prison that includes detention cells for solitary confinement, wet cells where detainees were forced to sit in water, fox-holes where prisoners could not straighten up, treatment rooms that contain instruments of torture, and pictures of those who died in the gallows from fatal beatings and, more often, suicide. The guard rooms hold ventilation equipment which ensured air-flow through conduits that traversed the cells, but individual cells were cut off from the airflow as a means of punishment. People's hands and feet were bound with chains and weights that were attached to their feet. Electric currents, burnings with cigarettes, and pliers were instruments of torture. Prisoners were forced to lie on the bare floors with no toilet facilities. What is remarkable is that during every visit, we witness young people who stand there and weep, not only for relatives they may have lost, but because they feel the horror of a part of their nation's history and have come to appreciate those who made the ultimate sacrifice for their freedom.

Interestingly, also in the museum is a tribute to the Hungarian Reformed Church. Since that church does not belong to any international church bodies, it is considered a "nation-based, Hungarian church." The two most respected Calvinist bishops of the past, László Ravasz and Imre Révész, raised their voices against the atrocities of the fledgling communist dictatorship as early as in 1945. The village pastors and priests were treated as enemies, and by July, 1945, already 30 cases were recorded of detained parish pastors in the diocese east of the Tisza River. Bishop Ravasz declared, "Right-wing fascism has been replaced by left-wing fascism."

### **Conclusion**

By recounting all these highlights I wish to stress the universal significance of 1956: the Hungarian Revolution doesn't just belong to Hungarians. It holds meaning for the rest of us who know, love and consider Hungarians so integral to our lives. And there's a lesson here for all – that no people can be subjugated forever, and that one can and must fight against a power thought to be invincible when oppression and terror become so unbearable that a nation's identity and its very existence are in danger. In October of 1956, the Hungarian people proved to themselves and the world that there are no small nations, only helpless ones. With their courage and self-sacrifice, the Hungarian freedom fighters inflicted a mortal wound on the feared Soviet empire. My luck was that I married a freedom fighter and in so doing, I personally shared in the impact of the '56 Revolution.

### ***Kathy Megyeri***

*Married to Leslie László Megyeri of the Hungarian Reformed Federation of America, Kathy Megyeri holds advanced degrees in English, and is a writer and consultant for an international education organization. She received the Outstanding Educator Award from the Washington Post in 1999 and currently writes for the Chicken Soup series. She and her husband reside in Washington, D.C.*

*Please also read the story of Kathy Megyeri's husband, László Megyeri.*