

We Huddled Each Night Around Our Radios: Memories of the Hungarian Revolution and of Immigrating to Canada

Between 1928 and 1971, Pier 21 in Halifax, Nova Scotia saw the arrival of one million people. The 1950s were the busiest years at Pier 21 but the staff and volunteers were still not prepared for what would be the last large wave of newcomers to pass through their doors, the Hungarian Revolution refugees. In October of 1956 the Hungarian people rose against the Soviet-controlled Communist regime. They were quickly crushed by Soviet tanks, inspiring 200,000 people to flee the country in less than three weeks. It was a short-lived uprising but it would make an indelible impression on those present and change the face of Canada's population forever.

Livia Purcell visited Pier 21 in September of 2001 and agreed to share her story with oral historian Amy Coleman. Livia was a university student in 1950s Budapest. Hungary had fallen under Soviet control as a result of Yalta Agreement between Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin. She recalled that the situation was so bad that people were afraid to answer their doors at night because they didn't know if it would be a member of the secret police or a friend. They listened to the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe hearing, 'rise and shake off your chains'. After having been oppressed for years, a spontaneous explosion of resentment and anger engulfed many Hungarians. Livia and other university students started to demonstrate against Soviet influence, this was unheard of. Their goal was a free Hungary. Word spread and demonstrations started in different cities.

Livia said, you could not tell who was shooting who. Among her clearest memories are images of people who were beaten and hung upside down on lampposts. She notes that a candle was placed under their heads so people could tell who they were at night. In her interview Livia explained that at first the Soviets seemed to leave and the Hungarians thought the revolution had been successful and that their country was free. It was free for about three or four days; the Soviets returned in force. That is when, Livia recalls, they devastated the city with their tanks and the piles of bodies began to appear. She remembers that as the tanks came in during the night, they went over the bodies. While all this was going on she would wonder why she wasn't screaming and why she wasn't telling people to stop because it was horrible. She says that you just keep on going. Livia's father decided that she should leave because he had heard that young people were disappearing. Like many others she fled to Austria.

Escaping from Hungary was the first step towards new lives in Canada. Yolán Bencsik and Eve Kende were children in October of 1956 but they remember the events that followed the revolution with the clarity that one has when circumstances make them grow up before their time. Yolán writes:

"We huddled each night around our radios giving us the news from Budapest. I saw five pointed stars in our town square, weighing many tons, tumble to the ground. Political prisoners were freed from jails. As the army troops moved in the fighting escalated. Each night we had our clothes by our bed ready to flee if they were to bomb our part of the town. The borders opened in October...

My father wasted no time to plan our escape. He was tired of the constant pressure to join the Communist Party, not having any money for the necessities of life and often times taking only a slice of bread with lard as his lunch. Our landlord accused my father of threatening to shoot his dog, but we didn't even own a gun, but because his landlord was a party member the trials went on and on, this of course prompted my father to make the decision to leave the country as soon as possible....My dad was offered a job if we stayed but he declined. His dream was to go to Canada and nothing would change that.”

Eve Kende was fifteen years old when her mother told her to pack the family’s most prized possessions into two bags. The great migration had started soon after the Soviet tanks crushed all hope on November 4th, 1956. It is mid-December when Eve begins her story:

“We had spent the evenings of the past month glued to the radio, listening to Radio Free Europe broadcasting messages from friends and relatives who safely made it to Austria... We marched on foot to an outlying farmhouse were crammed into the front room... Suddenly the door flew open and a very young uniformed border guard burst into the room. "You are all under arrest!", he shouted. “We are shipping you back to Budapest immediately. Anyone attempting to escape will be shot!” Silence fell. He left the room and we heard some shots ring out in the yard. When he returned people began to beg and ply him with watches, money, and jewellery. He was stony faced...

It seemed like hours later, but I suspect it was less than half an hour, the guard called us to halt. He pointed into the darkness and said there is the border and I am going to turn my back on you...About an hour into this walk across the fields an apparition seemed to float in the sky. A small town lit in bluish lights, all the streets lights in Hungary were yellow, appeared outlined in mid air...As we progressed it became clear that the apparition was an Austrian Village perched on a plateau. It was the prettiest sight!”

After the trauma of seeing their homeland devastated and many of their countrymen fall, and then making the dangerous trip to safety in Austria, many Hungarian refugees were eventually granted passage to Canada. In *The Hungarians in Canada*, Carmela Patrias notes that Canada responded to the Hungarian refugees’ plight swiftly and generously. She explains that J.W. Pickersgill, the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, announced that priority would be given to applications from Hungarian refugees and that to speed up the process of resettlement a special section of the Immigration Branch was established, medical examinations were simplified, and security clearances were waved.

Within ten months of the failed revolution 37,500 refugees were admitted to Canada at the expense of the Canadian government. For many of them their first impressions of their new home, for better or for worse, were formed at Pier 21. Their recollections range

from the poignant to the humorous but all convey the sense of gratitude that the newcomers felt to Canada for welcoming them.

Crossing on the Saxonnia, Stephan Csibor arrived with his wife Valerie and son Tom on February 2, 1957. It had been just five weeks since they escaped from Hungary.

“When we came out of Hungary we had to leave everything behind and the money we had been worthless outside the country. The clothing we wore was ill fitting. We got used shoes and clothing in Austria, since ours were ruined during our escape. Our only wealth was the \$15.00 (\$5.00 each) that we received when we arrived in Halifax; and we knew only two English words: "yes" and "no".

Stephan borrowed a Hungarian-English dictionary and grammar book; he studied at night because its owner used it during the day. By the end of March he had started working as a draftsman in the engineering office of Imperial Oil Ltd. He took evening classes and, many years later, retired as Department Head and Chief Civil Engineer. He ends his memoir with the words, “We now enjoy our retirement and look back with nostalgia to that day when we first saw Pier 21 and Canada, the land of promise for so many people like ourselves.”

Among the hundreds of arrival stories that Pier 21 staff have collected over the past five years Laszlo Galambos' first impressions of Canada are a favourite, “While on board the Britannic waiting to dock I became aware of the requirement that upon arrival we were to be taken to a "Hall". To my Hungarian ears that notion sounded unusual. You see in Hungarian, "Hal" with one "L" means "Fish", so I imagined that we were all to be taken into a giant fish! And the smells upon arrival at Halifax did not do much to convince me otherwise. Halifax smelled of fish.”

Elizabeth Fajta had not been warned about the fish smell but she certainly was prepared for the cold. She writes that the majority of the passengers on her crossing were also Hungarian refugees on their way to a new life in Canada. They had all been waiting in a camp in Holland since December so as not to make a winter crossing. She writes, “The Canadian government sent us lots of National Film Board shorts, beautiful films of Arctic wild flowers and how igloos were built. Seeing Pier 21 for the first time I was relieved to see there were no igloos in sight.”

In Struggle and Hope: The Hungarian-Canadian Experience by N.F. Dreisziger the author writes that the joint efforts of government, welfare agencies, and the Hungarian-Canadian community helped integrate the refugees into Canadian life. There was a new language to be learned, employment to be found, and a home to be made. The task was daunting as they had lost nearly everything, but almost fifty years later what we hear in their stories and interviews is pride. They survived, took great risks, and carved out a new life. Eve Kende concluded her memoir with the words, “The road was long and hard, but well worth travelling.” The refugees that had once huddled around radios and feared midnight knocks on the door were safe in Canada. It was not always easy, and for

some it took years to arrive, but Canada was free and, after oppression and revolution, that was all that mattered.