

An Anniversary Worth Remembering and Celebrating

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Twenty years ago, on a nice sunny August day at the border between Austria and Hungary, a gate was opened for a few hours during a cross-border picnic on the road between St. Margarethen/Margitbánya in Burgenland and Sopronköhida in Hungary. The picnic was held at Sopronpuszta; the event itself entered world history as the Pan-European Picnic of August 19, 1989. When visiting East German tourists in Hungary got wind of this event, they hurried there with their Trabis and Wartburgs, abandoned them at the roadside and fled through that open gate to Austria. Although the border guards still had orders to shoot, to their and their local commander's everlasting credit, they ignored the order and the exodus of about 600 East Germans ended without anyone getting hurt. Less than a month later, on September 11, the border between Hungary and Austria was opened for good. This bold act on the part of the Hungarian government at the time initiated a process that eventually culminated in the complete removal of the Iron Curtain from the Baltic to the Adriatic Seas, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the end of the Cold War.

In the two decades since then, there have been many positive political and economic developments between Hungary, Austria and the rest of Europe. And, although my focus on this 20th anniversary is on the good things that have already happened and on what the future may hold, let me begin with a brief recap of a terrible past so that we may never forget.

I was an eyewitness to and victim of the misery that Hungary's socialist government perpetrated on its citizens. Life was especially hard for those who lived in villages that were too close to the border. Pernau/Pornóapáti in the lower Pinka valley was one such village where as a boy I watched the Iron Curtain go up in 1948. I sensed the distress it caused among the adults and I experienced the sudden separation from our friends, relatives and neighbors on the other side in Gaas, Eberau, Kulm, Bildein, Edlitz, Winten, Höll, Deutsch-Schützen and Eisenberg. The security inside and outside my village was very tight, the isolation almost total. There was a time in the early 1950's when I feared that even a longing look to the West, past the mines and barbed wire, would be detected and punished by the grim border guards. My apprehension was justified. One day in 1953, my father and mother were arrested, detained and interrogated for merely exchanging greetings with my uncle, Father George Schrammel, on the other side. The ultimatum that my father was given by the secret police eventually led to his decision to escape during the revolution in 1956. There were many who couldn't tolerate being fenced in like cattle and so they tried to leave even before the revolution. Some made it, some did not. One dark night in 1952, our neighbor made an attempt to escape but he stepped on a mine that ended not only his dream of freedom but also his life.

After 1989, previously unthinkable developments greatly improved the lives of all people in former East Block countries, including Hungary. But the most significant improvement for the villages in the lower Pinka valley happened on December 21, 2007, when the border was finally opened to unrestricted local traffic. Before that, if they wished to visit each other, neighbors who lived only two kilometers from their destination had to travel hours to cross at a few designated crossings. In 2005, when I visited the site of the former Cistercian monastery of Pernau, located right by the border, an unguarded ramp and an old road, overgrown with tall weeds, stopped me from driving over to Deutsch-Schützen less than a kilometer from there. For a long while after that, a disturbing thought bothered me. Now that neighbors had a chance to rebuild a unity that had existed for centuries, they seemed unable or unwilling to do so.

A fundamentally different situation presented itself last year, during my most recent visit to my home village. The roads to Bildein and Deutsch-Schützen were now paved, open, and unguarded. When I drove to Bildein to visit relatives and boyhood friends, no one stopped me; no one cared that I was crossing from Hungary to Austria. The joy that I felt was the perfect antithesis to the fear I felt 52 years before that when my family and I took that same road to leave our ancestral home forever.

In the last two years, the villages in the lower Pinka valley have been busy establishing new connections to each other. In a recent e-mail, my godson Gottfried Eberhardt, a prominent citizen of the village of Bildein, wrote the following: “Much has changed since the opening of the border. On the negative side I would list the increased traffic through Bildein and two recent robberies. On the positive side, I can list many more examples. A Hungarian artist opened a shop in our village and he does very good work. *Kirchtage*, i.e., feasts of the patron saints are celebrated together. Fire departments from both sides have joint exercises. Young Hungarian soccer players now play for the Eberau Soccer Club. On July 26, a cross-border party was organized at which the Bürgermeister of Pernau displayed his Trabi and the women cooked Hungarian specialties. Our very successful “Picture On” rock festival on August 8 was also a cross-border affair. This September, a new private school is opening in Eberau in which German, English and Hungarian will be taught. Of the 72 students, half are from prominent Hungarian families. Often we go on bike tours to a *Buschenschank* or *Gasthaus* on the other side. The hunters of my village often go to the firing range in Hungary. Today I was shooting at our own firing range where by chance I met my relative from Großdorf/Keresztes. And by the way, when the mushrooms grow in our forest, one can find scores of Hungarians looking for mushrooms.”

Gottfried’s report may serve as an example of what is happening all along the border. Similar connections in other neighboring villages are recreating once again the social and economic fabric that used to make the Pinka valley a harmonious community. I remember a time shortly after the war when my uncle Lajos Takács from Deutsch-Schützen crossed the border every day to be a shoemaker’s apprentice to my father; family ties were strengthened by asking Austrian relatives to be godparents or confirmation sponsors; and like my grandfather Schrammel, who married a girl from Deutsch-Schützen, the border didn’t stop young people looking for partners on the other

side. Just about every family in Pernau had relatives in neighboring Austrian villages. As this natural interaction among neighbors is returning again, the lower Pinka valley is becoming once again what it was meant to be: a place where people can live in freedom and harmony, without the interference of national politics and pernicious ideologies.