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# The Hungarian Uprising of 1956

## By Emmerich Koller

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of November fifty-three years ago, a terrible tragedy was unfolding in the heart of Hungary. A popular uprising that began on October 23 was coming to a premature and bloody end. In the early hours of this day, an overwhelming force of Soviet troops and tanks attacked Budapest, and Hungary's hope for independence and freedom vanished under a hail of Russian shells and bullets.

Far from these tragic events in the capital city, in my village near the Austrian border, people were glued to radios trying to find out what exactly was going on. While listening to a broadcast from Radio Budapest on the first day of the uprising, I heard many gunshots in the background. Later I learned that the armed conflict began at the radio station where that broadcast originated when the AVO, Hungary's hated secret police, fired upon demonstrators. Now, thirteen days later, my father listened with dismay and fear to the desperate plea for help that Imre Nagy, Hungary's Prime Minister, sent out to the free world. Despite earlier promises, especially through CIA sponsored Radio Free Europe in Bavaria, no help materialized. By mid-morning, my father had reached a very important decision. He gathered us around him to inform us that we had to escape to Austria immediately.

As a fourteen-year-old boy I was a bit scared but also excited by this new development and started packing what I could carry. I did not yet know the underlying reasons for my father's fateful decision. As we trudged through the mud towards the border, loaded down with whatever we could carry – we lived very close to the Iron Curtain and knew where it was safe to cross – Father finally had time to share with his family of ten people the reasons for our leaving. He was escaping from the clutches of the secret police that had made his life intolerable in the past years. He also couldn't see us continue suffering the deprivations and indignities placed on us by Hungary's tyrannical Stalinist regime. As we said good-bye to Grandmother, who at the last minute decided to stay behind, we made a promise to her that we would be back just as soon as things got better again. Sadly, for years after our escape, the situation at home became worse instead of better and Grandma died of a broken heart waiting for her family's return.

When we stepped onto Burgenland's soil near Bildein at about noon that Sunday, we didn't know that we were just the front-runners of a massive exodus that unfolded in the following days and weeks. Before the border was closed tightly again, 200,000 Hungarians left their homeland with only their clothes on their backs and maybe a few possessions in their hands. From all corners of the country, refugees stole their way westward, to the safety and freedom in Austria. Once the escapees made it past the dangers and obstacles of the Iron Curtain, the people of Burgenland were ready to welcome their dispirited and traumatized guests with neighborly generosity and kindness.

The brutality with which the Russian forces crushed the revolution may have precipitated the exodus, but the reasons for leaving had been piling up during eight years of communist terror. Hungary's communist party took control of the government in 1948. Until Stalin's death in 1953, life in Hungary had become almost unbearable. The leaders of the regime initiated a reign of terror in Hungary that was harsher than in all other socialist countries, even harsher than in the Soviet Union. Throughout the land, people were persecuted, tortured and even executed on trumped up charges against the state. Tens of thousands were imprisoned or were taken to forced labor camps. On the eve of the revolution, the number of purge victims had reached over 200,000. Show trials, in which even communist political leaders like László Rajk were condemned to death and prominent religious leaders like Cardinal Mindszenty to life in prison, made a mockery of the justice system. Those who didn't end up in prisons or forced labor camps were coerced into spying and informing on each other. Friends and neighbors, even children, could no longer be trusted. Fear, mistrust, deprivation and a total disregard of human rights were the hallmarks of Hungary's Stalinist era.

For the small farmers in villages like Pornóapáti/Pernau where my family lived, the agrarian policies were the most difficult to take. Soon after they seized control of the government, the communists introduced the failed policies of the Soviet Union, complete with the persecution of the so-called *kulaks*, a strong push for collectivization, excessive delivery quotas and a counterproductive tax system. By the early 1950's, Hungary, a land that used to produce a surplus of food supplies, moved to the brink of starvation. These were the years when I often stood in line at the village store for an entire family's ration of half a loaf of bread or a small bottle of cooking oil.

After Stalin's death in 1953, Hungary experienced a very modest thaw; persecutions became a little less vicious, arrests a bit less frequent. In February 1956, Khrushchev denounced the crimes of Stalin. Poland reacted with a popular uprising in June, Hungary followed in October. Both uprisings were put down brutally by Russian forces. Thirty-three years later, the system collapsed on its own accord, exposing the flawed ideology and philosophy upon which it was built. And although great progress has been made since then in the embrace of the EU, long-term consequences of the damages that the socialist governments of Eastern Europe have caused linger to this day.