

HUNGARY'S 1956 UPRISING

TOLEDO AREA OFFERED HAVEN FOR REFUGEES OF CRUSHED REVOLT

Emigres recall Soviet repression, flight across borders

Originally published in *The Blade* on Sunday, October 22, 2006

By RYAN E. SMITH
BLADE STAFF WRITER

Julius Toth looked at his young friends and said, "If I don't come back, I am dead."

Maybe he was drunk on the prospect of freedom. Maybe he was just a natural daredevil.

Either way, he headed toward the front of the crowd of Hungarian students in Budapest who became famous for challenging the Soviets in 1956. Minutes later, shots were fired into the crowd, and a demonstration became a revolution.

"I say, 'Boys, what's going on?' " Mr. Toth remembers, speaking in heavily accented English. "They say, we try to kick out Russkies."

For a few glorious days, they succeeded. Tomorrow marks the 50th anniversary of that uprising, whose shots still echo through the minds of many in northwest Ohio.

More than 200,000 refugees poured out of Hungary's borders in the months after the revolt that was eventually crushed by the Soviets. More than 300 of them settled in the Toledo area.

Like a considerable number of the refugees, Mr. Toth, now 75 and living in Rossford, and his wife, Eva, 73, eventually landed in the eastside neighborhood of Birmingham, which already had a strong Hungarian presence.

And like many of them, Mr. Toth brought skills (he eventually started his own tool-and-die company), almost no knowledge of English, and the stories of a freedom fighter.

He can still remember the sounds - of the fighting in the streets as he tended to the fallen, of submachine-gun bullets ripping through his apartment, and, finally, heartbreakingly, of the innumerable Soviet tanks roaring toward Budapest more than a week later.

"They came from every direction," he said of the tanks. "You never hear anything like it."

MULTIMEDIA

[Refugees who fled to Toledo after the 1956 uprising share their memories.](#)



After fleeing Hungary, Julius and Eva Toth settled in East Toledo's Birmingham neighborhood, where a thriving Hungarian community welcomed them. They live now in Rossford. (THE BLADE/ANDY MORRISON)

Days of freedom

Hungary's spontaneous revolution began as a protest against the communist government's repressive policies and a demand for reforms, as well as support for striking workers in Poland.

When the Hungarian secret police fired into the crowd on Oct. 23, the crowd fought back.

Troops from the army joined with the rebels, handing out arms. Tanks were countered with Molotov cocktails. After days of courageous street fighting, the mighty USSR was forced to withdraw, and a new government that took office declared that the country was withdrawing from the Soviet-dominated Warsaw Pact.

State Rep. Peter Ujvagi (D., Toledo), a former Toledo city councilman from the east side who grew up in Hungary,

was only 7 at the time but remembers it well.

"Everybody was excited. They thought something phenomenal was about to happen," he said. "They took on the Russian might and Soviet power and ... were actually able to have five unbelievable days of freedom in Hungary."

It didn't last, though. American aid never materialized despite desperate pleas. And when Israel, Great Britain, and France invaded Egypt during the Suez Crisis in late October, the world's attention shifted.

The Soviets returned on Nov. 4 and the rebellion was quickly crushed. To many Hungarians, including the Ujvagi, it was time to leave.

"It wasn't as much the desperation [of the time] as the outlook of the future," said Mr. Ujvagi's older brother, Ed, 62, of West Toledo.

It took the family three tries in the dead of winter to escape. Once they were caught near the border, and another time they were abandoned by their guide.

Peter Ujvagi remembers walking in a no-man's land toward Austria and ducking to the ground whenever soldiers shot flares into the air - and seeing myriad others in both directions doing the same thing. He remembers hiding in the hay of a horse-drawn wagon to escape detection. He remembers nearly freezing to death as they wandered - sometimes in the wrong direction - toward freedom.

On Christmas Eve, they finally made it across the border, their worldly possessions reduced to a briefcase with a bottle of rum, a caliper, a cross, and a potty for the family's little girl.

Mr. Ujvagi, now 57, said he had little else that would be of use to him in the United States.

"I knew 'please,' 'thank you,' and I could sing 'Yankee Doodle Dandy,'" he said. Welcoming community

Among the 38,000 Hungarians who fled to the United States, often channeled through Camp Kilmer in New Jersey, was Louis Meszaros.

He was 18 at the time, and his youthful vigor got him caught up with the marches in Budapest, putting him in the middle of things when the shooting started.

Later, as the Soviet tanks rolled in, he remembered his father who was taken to Siberia after World War II and never returned.

"I just felt that I didn't want to follow in his footsteps," he said.

So he fled.

"I didn't even tell my mother I was leaving," said Mr. Meszaros of Lake Township.

It helped that there was a community here ready to welcome him. When Mr. Meszaros arrived in Toledo, a Blade headline proclaimed, "34 Single Refugee Men Arrive in City."

He and others were lured to the area by the promise of jobs. Some were also comforted by the presence of the Great Lakes - reminiscent of Lake Balaton in Hungary - and the climate, so similar to home.

Churches and social groups sponsored hundreds of refugees, allowing them to come to Toledo, and members of the local Hungarian-American community - some 13,000 strong at the time - volunteered to serve as interpreters and help them find jobs.

"You could tell that they were just desperate for help," remembered Judy Balogh, now 83, a West Toledo resident whose parents came from Hungary.

Hungarians settled in the area in waves - first around the turn of the 20th century when many were transferred to work at a new foundry in East Toledo. Those were followed by the displaced persons of World War II. Hungarian could still be heard on the streets of Birmingham when the '56ers, as they were known, arrived.



Peter, Charles and Edward J. Ujvagi, from left, examine old photos. (THE BLADE/ ANDY MORRISON)

"They were so happy to [find] that they were in a Hungarian neighborhood, that they could converse with people. That's what helped them an awful lot," Ms. Balogh said. "I don't remember any of them being able to speak any English at all."

Women from several churches came together to raise money for the newcomers.

"We paired up and went down the street. In one hour's time we collected \$1,300 dollars. In 1956, that was good," said Eleanor Mesteller, whose grandparents came from Hungary. Now 85, she lives in Jupiter, Fla.

Louis and Mary Bango came to Toledo after escaping Hungary with just their clothes and two sandwiches made of bread and lard.

"It's so hard to start a new life from nothing," said Mrs. Bango, a 74-year-old Oregon resident. "You don't have anything. No English, no money ... no job."

The couple took English lessons at Scott High School. Someone gave them a refrigerator. Another sold them a Studebaker for \$50. They stayed with different families until they landed jobs and were able to pay for their own apartment.

"Everybody was so nice," she said.

At the time, the defeat in Hungary left a bitter taste for many. Thousands in Hungary were arrested by the Soviets, and some were executed, according to Don K. Rowney, a Bowling Green State University history professor who studies the former Soviet Bloc.



Hungarian revolutionaries wave their flag atop a captured Soviet tank during the brief moment of success before a massive USSR invasion on Nov. 4 crushed the rebellion. (ASSOCIATED PRESS)

'People should be free'

Still, the short-lived Hungarian revolution was the impetus for gradual changes over the years, said Krista Harper, a University of Massachusetts anthropologist whose specialty is Hungary. Today in Hungary, recent political unrest was met with demonstrations, not bullets.

For many, the events of 1956 still resonate as a tale of courage about people with a passion for freedom.

"What they also had was a willingness to put their lives on the line to achieve that goal," she said. "That's pretty rare. That's why it continues to inspire people."

The event made a generation of Hungarians into philosophers of sorts.

"People should be free," said Mr. Meszaros, a Jeep worker for many years.

"When I was growing up ... you couldn't do anything you really wanted to," he continued. "You couldn't dance the way you wanted. They told you what to do. The police could stop you anytime, anywhere. ... The stores were always empty. You couldn't get anything."

Mr. Toth couldn't agree more about how much their fortunes have changed.

"This country gave me everything I wanted," he said. "A wonderful, peaceful life."

Contact Ryan E. Smith at: ryansmith@theblade.com or 419-724-6103.

[< previous](#)

[next >](#)