

## ONE AMONG THE MANY

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### Absztrakt

#### *EGY A SOK KÖZÜL*

Ez a tanulmány a vasfüggöny mögött élő különféle fiatalok emlékeinek és tapasztalatainak gyűjteményét osztja meg. Bár az idő puffere tompíthatja a történelmet, azoknak, akik a terror és az igazságtalanság világában nőttek fel, az általuk átélt események betörték az elméjükbe. Legalábbis azoknak, akik túléltek. A pillanatok – hol jelentéktelennek, hol életveszélyesnek tűnve – válnak a vasfüggöny mögötti élet allegóriáivá. Tanulságul szolgálnak a következő generációk számára az életről és a történelem ciklikusságáról.

**Kulcsszavak:** vasfüggöny, emlékek

**Diszciplína:** történelem

### Abstract

This study shares a collection of memories and excerpts from the experiences of various youths living behind the Iron Curtain. Though the buffer of time may soften history, for those who grew up in that world of terror and injustice, the events they lived through seared into their minds. At least, for those who survived. Moments – some seemingly insignificant, some life-threatening – become allegories of life behind the Iron Curtain. They become a lesson for subsequent generations about life and the cyclic nature of history.

**Keywords:** Iron Curtain, memories

**Discipline:** history

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This series of mostly verbal interviews give us an intimate perspective on historical events. The events span decades; the children who lived through them, are now mostly grandparents. The following are memories of events that shaped three generations.

### 1. Theoretical Framework

“If we do not change our direction, we are likely to end up where we are headed.” - Chinese Proverb. Without knowing the past, without understanding it, it is not possible to know the direction that events are taking. To have a say in the future, it is essential to understand the past. The following biographical moments give a depth of insight to Hungary’s recent past. “Because Vygotsky regarded language as a critical bridge between the sociocultural world and individual mental functioning, he viewed the acquisition of language as the most significant milestone in children’s cognitive development.” (Berk and Winsler, 1997 p. 12)

Hungarian children who grew up outside of their homeland, retained their native tongue through conscious effort. It gave them a sense of intimacy with other Hungarian speakers and a duality in their cognitive development.

*“Virágosztások fel egyházközségeket, hogy örök érvényű szellemi örökséget hagyhassatok utódaitokra.”* Mindszenty József bíboros (Török I., 1978, p. 144) Meaning: “Make your parish attractive and fulfilling for your community, so that you can pass on true

and timeless values to your posterity.” The work we do today – the way we live; the stories we tell – determine what values we pass on to the younger generations. What we give them are the tools to pass on our values in an ever-changing world.

#### 1. 1. The End of World War II

I.K. who was a student when they had sent him to the Russian front, came home by foot after the Battle of Voronezh. Though the Russian winter had already set in, they were all still in the same summer military uniform in which they had been deployed. There had been no contingency plan: their side had lost and now they were all without food, supplies, or transportation. I.K. had received a package from his mother before the retreat. It contained a small tray of Zserbo pastry. He broke it in half on his knee and gave one half to his friend. Somewhere along the way, they found onions. They rationed these two into tiny morsels with large servings of snow for the many months of trekking and hiding from both men and beasts. Plagued by cold, hunger, sleeplessness, fear and the ghosts of their fallen brethren, they stayed alive. I.K. came home to find his father dead, his mother thrown out on the streets and his family's estate now owned by Russians. Fortunately, I.K. and his mother found each other and she fed him thin soup, one spoonful at a time. He survived. His friend's family was poor enough to survive the Russian occupation. He was

received by his family and in their joy they fed him well. His weakened system could not cope and he died.

## 1.2. Forced Migrations

C.K. was a countless and a young mother when they were forcibly transplanted to the Hortobágy along with so many others. Their identification cards were taken and destroyed. They were herded onto farms, sorted into pens to sleep alongside hogs and sheep at night, and forced to labor on the fields through-out the day. C.K. was continuously ill from the filth, the labor, the cold and the hunger that tormented them all. Christmas came. C.K. wrapped herself as best she could and trudged into the wind-whipped prairie.

“It’s Christmas. I have to find something for my son,” she decided. She spotted a young juniper bush by the roadside. A villager was working nearby.

“Uncle,” she greeted him politely – it is a Hungarian custom to call older men as such. “Please lend me this tool, so I can cut out this little juniper bush. It would be a Christmas tree for my son.”

“Did you come from that site?” the man asked.

“Yes.”

“I cannot help you. I’ll get in trouble. The tool is there. I’m not looking that way. When you’re done put it back by the road where you found it.” That was how her son had a Christmas tree that year. It would be three years before they were granted human status again, at least for the ones who survived it. (Many years later,

they managed to escape to the USA. They were very active in the New York Hungarian community.)

## 1.3. Enforced Labor

I.K. had become a husband and a father. He left a six-month-old and an eighteen-month-old along with his wife when they came to punish the overly educated. Some sixty men from the town were rounded up – engineers, lawyers, architects, anyone with a university degree. They threw down some straw in the main hall of the repurposed old castle. That was their barn, their bed for the duration of their undefined sentence. They slaved away in the fields and could have no contact with their families. I.K.’s wife was not the only woman suddenly left alone to work and raise children on her meager salary.

“At least, we’re in good company,” I.K. laughed bitterly. It was small comfort, while staring into the abyss of a hopeless future. The forced labor lasted two years. On top of the strain that time had put on his family, I.K. – who had once been a respected lawyer – now could only find employment as a servant at the local shoe-maker.

## 1.4. „Malenkij robot”

The war was in its final throws, but the Russian army was already comfortably stationed in Hungary. One day, in the town where L.H. lived, they gathered a portion from each household for a little

labor – malekij robot. The task was digging trenches. Since they were young and childless, L.H. and her brother's fiancé were the two chosen for the task from their family. The Russian soldiers promised to return everyone after three days and carted them off. Regardless of age, strength or gender they were all assigned the same length of trench to dig each day; food and sleep could only be earned by completing the task. The winter ground was frozen making digging difficult and work stretched long into the night. The short hours of rest were on a hay-strewn floor of a building, packed so tight that if someone shifted, they all had to turn, as well.

They had been digging the trench for a week already and there still had not been any mention of an end, when L.H.'s brother returned from the front. He sent them a message in secret to claim a sick day for themselves by whatever means. The next day, he arrived with a cart full of cots and dressed as a military paramedic. He shouted and cursed that he needed people to pull the cart.

"We don't have any here," the guards at the camp replied. "They're out digging trenches."

"And those two?"

"They're ill."

"Give them here, I need people!" the false-paramedic demanded and the guards handed them over. "Well? Hurry up! Pull the cart!" And he scolded them as they went along. When they were well out of site he said to his sister and fiancé:

"The town is that way. About thirty-five kilometers. Speak to no one and let no one see you." The two girls made their way home and kept themselves out of sight. About a week later, some people were allowed home, some were not. Several ended up in Siberia. That was the meaning of a little labor.

## **2.1. Those Who Left**

### *2.1.a E.M.'s Story*

E.M. was four years old, munching on a bun as they were passing by the Budapest Zoo. The elephant reached out with its trunk and stole her bun. This was her only memory of her life in Hungary; they fled the country that winter. They lived in a refugee camp in Bavaria after that.

"Damn foreigner." The locals made no secret of their displeasure at hosting the refugees and they often hurled at the unwanted newcomers wherever they met. E.M. recalls crying a lot during this time. She started school with about a hundred students crammed into a classroom. There was strict discipline.

For fifth grade, she entered a Catholic school run by the Congregation of Jesus, an order of nuns. She could see her father once every other week for a few hours. Here, too, she would often cry because she was bullied, lonely and had no one to speak Hungarian with. One of the nuns told her that her language was beautiful.

"If you have no one to practice it with, talk to yourself," she said. (Berk,1985) "It's

good to be Hungarian.” These words stuck with E.M. and gave her life a purpose. She not only managed to keep her language, she raised her children bilingually in the USA. She and her children have done much in the Hungarian American community in passing on the Hungarian language and culture to the younger generations.

#### *2.1.b I.S.’s Story*

I.S. lived in Transylvania with his parents and his sisters until they had to flee the country. They packed what they could onto a horse-drawn carriage and headed West. The trip to Austria took months and, as their supplies depleted, there were days when they did not eat. Though they were left without even a horse to pull their carriage by the time they reached the Austrian Alps, his parents still managed to somehow enroll him in a school in Innsbruck. The principal there was both kindhearted and clever. He knew the American soldiers stationed there were given bacon and eggs for breakfast every morning, but the grease in which they fried it was discarded. So he gathered the used grease from them and sold it to cover the school and dormitory fees for I.S. and other refugee boys like him. Because of this principal, I.S. was able to finish school and become an engineer. (I.S., his six children, and many grandchildren live in the USA and all of them speak Hungarian and many of them are active in their local Hungarian American community.)

#### *2.1.c Zs.B.’s Story*

Zs.B. was five, her brother was seven when they were crossing the border from Hungary to Austria. The area was littered with land-mines from the war. It was her brother’s idea to throw stones ahead to avoid them and so they made it across in one piece. They also spent some time in a refugee camp before making their way to the USA. Zs.B. was a smart girl, but she was a girl. What money they could scrounge up went to pay for her brother’s schooling. She worked to put her husband through school. She had children to raise and they also needed to go to school. Even now, she the primary caretaker for her mother who suffers from severe Alzheimer’s disease. She worked all her life to support her loved ones and though she is an old woman now, she still sometimes wonders what it would have been like to go to school.

### **3.1. Those Who Stayed**

#### *3.1.a Gy.A.’s Story*

Gy.A.’s father had been a Naval Officer until the war ended. He came home missing limbs and blacklisted, but he worked odd jobs as best he could. They lived together in a one-room apartment – her parents and Gy.A. with her six siblings. In those days, children were indoctrinated into the party via the Pioneer Movement, a system based on the Scout Movement. When she was ten years old, Gy.A.’s class was inducted as Pioneers; there was a big celebration with music and singing as the children received their red neckties. But

the daughter of a blacklisted man was not allowed in. The teacher was soon informed of her oversight and the very next morning, she stood Gy.A. in front of the whole class.

“She’s a dirty capitalist,” the teacher said. “You are not worthy of being a Pioneer.” And she took back the red necktie. From then on, Gy.A. was ostracized by her teachers and her classmates. She became a pariah for the rest of her school days. (The shame stays with her even now, in her gray-haired days.)

### *3.1.b J.K.’s Story*

When J.K. was fourteen, she was a straight “A” student, was a willing volunteer in class, took initiative, and was well-liked by her classmates. The letter arrived on the day of her middle school graduation that she did not get accepted to high school. The sin of being a teacher’s child outweighed her academic achievements. They recommended that she work as a mortar hand, refilling the mortar buckets for the brick layers, for three years to be absolved. Then she could reapply as a working girl and an acceptable member of society. (Fortunately for J.K. her parents were both willing and able to support her as an unofficial student for a semester. After that, since two girls flunked out, J.K. was able to take one of the vacated seats. She became a college professor.)

### *3.1.c B.G.’s Story*

In those days, there were many children that could not attend high school for crime of having unfavorable family origins. B.G. was a teacher who desperately wanted to rectify this. He managed to maneuver the bureaucratic hoops necessary to secure a building, acquire the funding and collect blacklisted teachers to start a special school. He spent a summer breaks visiting towns and villages across the Hungarian Lowlands enrolling the brightest blacklisted students. Both the teachers and the students were very proactive and eager, because everyone recognized the miracle of this opportunity. It became a splendid school that still functions to this day.

However, the school quickly began to gain fame in academic and sports competitions. This contradicted the communist doctrine and propaganda of the time. That is why, the Russian military visited one day. They called out one of the classes, lined them up along the wall of the old building, and shot them. Dozens of children collapsed bleeding just outside the school to discourage attendance and send a message of warning to any potential new students. No one dared go near them that day. When the sun set B.G. and a female PE teacher sneaked back to the school and carried the survivors to the school basement. There they treated their wounds as best they could, since hospitals in such a situation were not an option. (To this day, the alumni of this school form a very tight-knit community, despite dispersing across the country and across

the world. Both B.G. and the PE teacher lived to be over a hundred and were visited every year by their former students.)

#### **4.1. Aftershocks of 1956**

##### *4.1.a J.G.'s Story*

“One among the many” is the title of this article and a poem by J. Glaser. (G. György, 2013) He was a youth and a freedom fighter in the battles of 1956. They were enthusiastic and full of hope because they believed in their cause. A beautiful blond little girl fought at his side. She was his first encounter with love. And when the weapon fell from her hand, she was his first encounter with death. But she was just one among the many who died that day. And he was just one among the many that lived through the interrogations, torture and terror that came after. He lived, fled for his life, found refuge, started a family. He entrusted his heritage to his children and grandchildren growing up in foreign lands. But the ghosts of the past will always haunt him. They are warning us, that we are all just one among the many.

##### *4.1.b M.B.'s Story*

M.B. was nine years old when her family fled the country after the 1956 revolution. They landed in Canada after living in a refugee camp. Her parents worked hard and long to ensure their survival. Her grandmother took care of the house and raised the two children. M.B. started fourth grade in the back row of the class. Even before she understood a word, she understood the ridicule in the teacher's

tone when she called on M.B. to answer questions and she understood the snickering of her classmates. She learned the language well enough and fast enough to pass her classes despite the cold reception. (Later, she raised a family and became a college professor.)

##### *4.1.c E.P.'s Story*

The Pongrátcz brothers were famous in Hungary for the ferocity with which they defended their neighborhood against the Russians. Later, they created a museum focused on the 1956 revolution to commemorate the fallen heroes, the youths that died in battle, the youths that died in the aftermath, and the youths that lived protecting the spirit of the revolution. They believed that knowledge is not inherited, but must be consciously passed on from generation to generation. The youth of today, don't have parents who lived through the wars. E.P. had made it his life's calling, as their descendant, to continue their work. He created an organization called Re-Connect Hungary that gathers youths of Hungarian descent and teaches them about the language, culture, history, and values of the country their parent's left behind.

#### **Conclusion**

History is taught in different version depending on the political environment, but the memories of those who lived through it give an intimate and true picture on a small scale. The more memories of true events that are gathered the clearer

picture we can form of the actual events in detail without the filter of political propaganda. While this generation still lives, it is the subsequent generations responsibility to ask for and listen to these stories from within their own families. It is the responsibility of the older generations to speak when they have the ability to speak, about that which is most important to them. They must pass on what they know and what they lived to those younger than them, so that posterity might protect the values their forefathers held dear and avoid the darker turns of history before they become unavoidable. This is the proper rhythm of social inheritance: children beg for stories so that they may learn, young adults internalize that information to shape the world around them and the elderly pass on their stories to the next generation of children. Those growing up in Hungary, did not have a consistency in their traditions and sub-cultures. For instance, those of Germanic lineage were forbidden to pass on their language and customs. The Russian attempt to normalize Russian in Hungary failed with the next generation and now the youngest generation of Hungarians are struggling to learn English. On top of that, they are often taught that they – as a nation – Hungarians hold little or no value in the scale of world history. This is only because so many Hungarian scholars, inventors, innovators and other heroes of humanity are not taught by Hungarians to their children. These teachings were banned or rewritten by the

various invaders and foreign rulers who have had power in Hungary one after the other. That is why Hungarians have to take responsibility to educate themselves through other sources, (Bolyki, 2004) as far as foreign historians and as close as the memories of their family and friends.

### **Discussion**

It is difficult to be a child in difficult times. It's practically impossible to grow up without emotional scars, regardless of whether the child was swept to one side of the Iron Curtain or the other. Everyone had different obstacles to battle as they shaped themselves into adulthood. This learning curve is never linear; every child's life a novel in and of itself. To remain Hungarian through all that takes sacrifice and many have chosen to make the necessary sacrifices. When talking about immigrants, usually the first generation builds, the second maintains, and the third dissolves. It is amazing then that there are third and fourth generation Hungarians living in the stolen territories and around the world. Currently, we have 33 Hungarian schools in 22 US states. There are strong Hungarian communities in Canada, South America, Australia and in Europe.

In these post-COVID years, travel and natural interaction has significantly decreased. But a new world has opened up, as well. Today's youth are citizens of a new digital world where they feel safe and comfortable. Even if this pandemic were to end, the world we had before it will



never return. (Podráczky, 2013) We learn and internalize new routines, technologies, and world views. The world has gotten much smaller and it is up to us what we carry over from the past into the present, what we use to build our future.

“Mér föld járó öreg csizmákban a vihar / Erre toppan olykor szürke lábaival: / Az se sok marad; elszáll és nincs biba: / Mint orgona után a néma bazilika.” *Dal az Esztergomi Bazilikáról* (Babits Mihály 1924) Meaning: “The storm stops by now and then in its seven-league-boots and gray legs. / But its footprint never stays long; it dissolves and flies on / like the silence in the basilica at the end of the pipe organ’s song.” The poem stands true even today. If our roots have the strength of our faith, familiarity, and feeling then we can weather the storms of history. Hungarians have survived many storms over the past centuries, but the storms always pass, “like the silence in the basilica at the end of the pipe organ’s song.”

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