Martha and Kathy Takács

Memories of Two Sisters Fleeing Their Homeland

The Start of the Revolution

I was 9 yrs. old and my sister Kathy was 8. We were doing our school homework on Oct. 23, 1956. My Mom came home from work, very excited, telling my grandfather, who was babysitting us, to turn on the radio. She told us about the exciting march and happenings on the Buda side of the Danube that afternoon. She worked downtown on Dorottya street., near the famous Gerbeaud Pastry Shop. She and other fellow colleagues went to the top of the high office building to see university students from the "Müegyetem," marching with Hungarian flags, singing patriotic songs and yelling for others to join in. They were marching to the statue of General Bem (a Polish national hero) to show sympathy for the recent striking marchers in Poland and to lay a wreath there.

My father came home from his office and my Mom was trying to explain to him that something important had happened. He calmed her down and said let's have dinner and we are going to the Madács Theatre, downtown. The play started on time at 8 pm. You could already notice some excitement in the crowd, but no one knew what was happening on the other side of the city. After an hour into the play, gunshots were heard outside from a distance. The play was stopped and one actor, Bárdi György came out on stage and recited a poem by the famous Hungarian poet, Ady Endre. This was a surprise and not part of the program. Everyone was told to go home. Outside, on the streets, people everywhere were excited and yelling "There is a revolution. Let's go to Brody Sándor street to take over Radio Budapest and announce to the country and to the world that the Revolution has begun." This was around 10 pm. They also wanted to announce over the radio the demands of the Hungarian people, which had already been announced earlier that afternoon at the Bem statue. The university students had outlined the 16 demands. Some of the highlights of the 16 demands were that the Soviet troops leave Hungary; a new government be formed; institute free elections; remove the red star, hammer and sickle from the Hungarian flag and bring back the Hungarian Kossuth emblem; remove the gigantic statue of Stalin form the city park (Városliget); and reinstate March 15th as a national holiday.

Walking down Rákoczy street, which is parallel to Brody Sándor street, my parents could hear gunshots and people were shouting "Let's go to the Stalin statue in the Városliget." At this late hour there was no public transportation, so people had to walk. Trying to get home, my parents had to walk to the Keleti train station, from where transportation was still available. Once they arrived home and listened to the radio, the Communists called this a counter-revolution. In their eyes, a counter-revolution is one that opposes the Soviet Revolution of 1918, which was to impose and spread communism to the world.

Glorious Days of Freedom Crushed

During the few days of freedom, I remember going with my parents to visit my widowed aunt and her two sons. We had to cross the Köztársaság Square, where the AVO headquarters was located. It was from here that the AVO had shot into the demonstrating crowds of innocent people, including the Red Cross rescuers. After the freedom fighters took over the AVO/Communist Party Headquarters, they were so angry at the AVO police that they hanged some of them outside, with heads facing down, from the limbs of trees. Walking across the square, we could see the aftereffects of this tragic fighting. In my memory today, I can still see the hanging bodies from the trees, of the AVO police, and on the ground, the fallen bodies of the brave freedom fighters, covered with flowers and burning candles surrounding them. During our walk, I remember seeing broken shop windows, some of them displaying a box with the sign that read "Please Contribute

to the Families of Our Dead Heroes." It was striking and memorable that no one would think of removing even one paper bill from there, but just to donate.

We had no school during this time. My parents continued going to work each day, on foot, because public transportation had been disrupted. At their work, not much was accomplished, since everybody was exchanging the latest happenings from the previous day, and discussing what they heard on the Radio Free Europe, to which not everyone had access. My parents strictly advised my grandfather, who was our babysitter, not to take us outside, because intermittent shots were heard on the streets and fighting could erupt at any time.

As days went by, the hope and spirit of the country was drastically diminishing. I remember seeing that hopelessness and sadness in the faces of my parents, relatives and their friends. The most tragic moment came when the Prime Minister of Hungary, Imre Nagy, cried out to the western world, via the radio, pleading for S.O.S. help for the last time. No help came. We all knew that this was the end and that revenge would follow.

The glorious days of freedom ended by November 4th, when Hungary had to realize that help from the Western Nations, the U.S. and the United Nations were not forthcoming. Upon seeing this, the Soviets took the opportunity to invade Hungary once again. Hundreds of Soviet tanks showed up in Budapest, and airstrikes bombed the city. Both my sister and I distinctly remember the scary feeling we had seeing a huge Soviet tank parked underneath our first floor balcony. The turret of the tank was facing the district city hall across our street. When the shootings got heavier on the streets, I remember having to run down to the basement of our apartment building for safety. Even our living room window shattered. In the basement, we were prepared with cots, blankets and food, in case we would have to spend days or nights there.

The Soviet and the Hungarian Communist leaders started to arrest the high-ranked sympathizers of the revolution (i.e. Nagy Imre, Maléter Pál). They were preparing list of names of the sympathizers at all work locations. At the beginning of January of 1957, my father received a verbal warning at his work from a member of the communist party that his name was also on the list. This meant that the communists would question his actions during the days of the revolution, question his political views and the possibility of arrest could follow.

My father worked for the Hungarian National Bank, dealing with authorization of foreign currencies. During the first days of the revolution, he and his colleagues organized a committee as to what they should do to stop any activity in foreign accounts of the Hungarian National Bank in foreign countries. Their goal behind this was to prevent the possibility of the Soviets getting their hands on these accounts, with the help of the Hungarian communists. My father, with one of his colleagues, accomplished this task, based on information received at the British Embassy in Budapest.

The Turning Point for Us

The fact that my father's name was on the list of sympathizers forced my parents to find a way to leave the country. By this time strict rules were established by the government to stop the flow of refugees out of the country. During November and December of 1956, thousands of Hungarians had fled across the border with relative ease. By January and February of 1957, that was not the case. If you were caught attempting to leave the country, the sentence was 10 years in jail, without trial. If anyone assisted someone attempting to leave the country, that person received the same sentence. My father's sister, who lived in the apartment across the hall from ours, said that if she suspected that we would attempt to leave the country, she would report us to the authorities herself. She was so worried and concerned about our safety.

It just so happened that a distant relative from Szombathely stopped by at our apartment, bringing with him falsified I.D. documents for my mother's brother. He indicated that my mother's brother could not use these documents for attempting to leave the country, because his 6 year-old son had suddenly come down with pneumonia. So he asked why not take this opportunity to leave the country? This came as an unexpected blessing, my parents thought. They agreed. Things happened real fast from there on. Within 24 hours, our relative had our falsified documents ready. The documents indicated that we had been residents of Szombathely since 1953. By mid-January, travel outside of Budapest was limited to the city of Györ. One could travel further only if one was a resident of a town or city beyond Györ, or if one had special permission from the authorities. As the decision my parents made to leave the country came so suddenly, they requested a week off

from work to go on their annual ski vacation. Since they had taken ski vacations every year, this request would not draw any suspicion. Without telling relatives, except for my grandmother, we packed a small suitcase and headed to the Keleti train station. My father bought a sleeping coach train ticket to Szombathely. My sister and I were excited about sleeping quarters on the train, as we had never experienced this before. We did not completely understand why my grandmother was crying as we were looking out the window of the train. We only remember my mother asking her "Please don't cry, because it can draw attention." But she could not help herself and just kept on crying, because she loved us so and could not stand the thought of not seeing us again. The train departed. My sister and I had fallen asleep. After a few hours, the train stopped in Györ, where soldiers boarded to check everyone's I.D. papers. When the soldier came to our compartment, my father opened the door and showed the soldier that the family was sleeping and gave him our documents. The soldier was very cordial and left. After midnight, the train stopped in Szombathely, where our relative was waiting for us. We went to his house to stay till the next day. He already had plans for us for the next day as to how we would reach the border.

The Plan and our First Attempt

The next evening our relative walked us to the train station, where our guide would recognize us without any verbal contact. The guide, a friend of our relative, was a mailman. We were not supposed to talk to each other. In case there would be an inspection on the train, we should say that we were going to a funeral. We were wearing the black bands around our arms as was the custom. As soon as we boarded the train, we sat a short distance away from our guide just so that we could see each other. The plan was that we would get off where he gets off and follow him at a distance. The train stopped. When our guide got off, so did we. The station was unusually filled with many soldiers. Our guide did not know the reason for this; neither did we. He panicked and disappeared.

My father did not panic and had to make a quick decision as to what we ought to do without arousing suspicion. From nervousness and fear, he broke out in a sweat dripping from his face. This picture has remained in our memory for a lifetime. He noticed a road sign with the name of a village about 6 km away. We headed on foot in that direction in the night. After a few kilometers, we had to cross a small bridge. Suddenly, two soldiers jumped out from underneath the bridge, flashing lights in our face, yelling to stop and asking where we were going. My father named the village, stating that the children were tired and sleepy and we had a funeral to attend the next day. They let us go. Further along, we came upon a small wooded park, close to the village. My father decided that we should stay in the park, and not try to enter anyone's house for fear that we may be reported. This village was close to the border, and thus not reporting non-resident folks was more seriously punished. We would stay here till daybreak, when the soldier guards by the bridge we crossed would be changed. In the morning, we walked back to the station crossing the same bridge without anyone stopping us and we boarded the train back to Szombathely. Our relatives were shocked to see us, because our guide already informed them during the night that we were captured. They were expecting that the police would be showing up to arrest them, instead of us. We had to rest. All of us had to calm our nerves. We were discussing the abandonment decision our guide had made, along with his false assumption that we were captured. Further discussions ensued about us giving up the whole idea of leaving the country and that we should return to Budapest, because the danger and risks were too high. Meanwhile, we found out that the border had been closed, the so-called Iron Curtain was set up, and tighter controls were in place. The nearby villages were filled with Soviet tanks and soldiers.

Our Second Attempt

Our relatives encouraged us that we should try again and they almost guaranteed a success for us. Two days later, in the early evening hours, our relative took us to the same train station as before. We boarded the train ourselves. A short time later, we got off at Egyházasrádoc. We were to meet a woman standing next to the red-colored mailbox located on the exterior wall of the station building. She would then lead us to a nearby small house, where we had to wait for a farmer boy to take us to the border village of Kiskölked.

It was dark by the time the boy arrived on his bicycle. The date was February 17, 1957, and the rain outside was pouring in buckets. For this type of weather, the Hungarian saying goes “One does not even let the dogs out.” The boy instructed us not to talk, walking ahead of us about 10 feet, as he was pushing his bicycle by his side. To our surprise he did not take the road, but led us across the tilled farmland toward the border village. From the heavy rain, the ground was thoroughly soaked by now, the mud knee deep. With our regular shoes, each step we took was

extremely difficult. In fact, my Mom lost one of her shoes in the mud, but there was no time to stop. She was crying out “My homeland does not want me to leave, but is pulling me back.” The farmer boy had no problems with his steps, because he was wearing heavy rubber boots up to the knee. After trudging through the deep mud for about 2 hours, we arrived at the farmer boy's parents' farmhouse. Needless to say, we were soaking wet. They insisted that we remove all of our wet clothing and place them by the fire to dry. Meanwhile, my father had asked the farmer to sell a pair of boots to us for my Mom to use, as she could not continue on with just one shoe. Then we went to bed. Barely getting an hour of sleep, we were awakened by the farmer that the Hungarian soldier, who was to lead us to the border, had arrived. He insisted that we leave right away to take advantage of the particularly dark night, the thick clouds in the sky, implying that for a while there would be no moonlight. This would be to our advantage. We had to put our half-dried clothes back on. This was not a pleasant feeling. We started to walk, my father holding my hand, my Mom holding my sister's hand, and the soldier with his rifle in front of us. My sister remembers to this day how my Mom's hand was shaking. The soldier instructed us that if we saw flares light up the sky, we needed to get down on the ground. If we were caught, the soldier would say that he found us trying to escape. We walked about 6-7 kilometers. At one point we had to cross a ditch that was waist-deep with rainwater. I specifically remember the soldier having to raise his arm to keep his rifle out of the water. My father carried me across, and the soldier helped carry my sister across.

After midnight, from a distance we could hear dogs barking. The barking came from the direction of a lookout tower. Our soldier knew the exact schedule of the patrol guards between the two towers and the best time for us to cross. Between the Hungarian and Austrian border, the soil is tilled differently with about a 3 meter width, which is to indicate the border, called “határsáv.” Here, the soldier shook hands with my father and wished us good luck. He pointed toward small light in the distance and a church steeple, indicating the nearest Austrian village. He also warned us that the border is wavy in this area, and it is easy to make the mistake of ending up back in Hungary. My father gave him one of his shirt cufflinks to return to our relative, who had the other. This was our signal code that our escape was accomplished.

Though Refugees, but Free at Last

We crossed the border and continued walking a short distance. We had to take a rest, since us kids were especially tired by now. We took a rest in the bushes, so as not to be seen. My father made us drink some schnapps to prevent the chance of pneumonia, as we were still in wet clothes on a cold February night. We started walking again and came upon a small wooden hut, probably used by the border patrol guards. Inside, there was barely enough room to fit two persons sitting on the bench next to a wood fire stove. My sister and I sat down on the bench and were asleep within minutes. My parents, however, had to stand. My father lit the cigarette lighter and noticed that the inside walls of the hut were covered with German language newspaper from top to bottom. Therefore, we positively knew now that we were, in fact, in Austria. To dry our clothes, my father collected a few branches from nearby, tore down the newspapers from the wall, and tried to start a fire. Since the branches were wet, this created more smoke than warmth. In a few hours, daybreak came and my father looked out from the small 5 X 7 inch glass on the door. He noticed two border patrol soldiers in the far distance, but could not distinguish whether they were Austrian or Hungarian. My Dad said that we have to give a sign no matter what happens. So he stepped outside the hut and started waving his arms. When the soldiers changed direction to head toward us, and got closer we thanked God that they were Austrians. When they reached us, both my parents started to cry. Since they both spoke German, they explained to the soldiers that we were refugees, asking for help. Very politely they led us to the village of Moschendorf, where we met with officials and the Red Cross. As we were walking through the village, we must have been an awful sight to behold as the villagers were staring at us, at our dried, muddy clothes, peasant boots and smoky smell.

The officials registered us as refugees. At first they doubted us, because not many refugees made it over the border at this time in February 1957, due to the strict border controls. Because both my parents spoke German, the officials suspected that we might be spies. We had to wait a few hours for a military officer, who asked information about our escape. What he wanted to know most was what we saw at the border villages, how many Soviet tanks, Soviet soldiers, and how we made our escape. This was important to them because they were worried that the Soviets could easily invade Austria again, as they did during World War II. My father asked for information on how he could notify a friend, living in Vienna, of our escape. A memorable event occurred, when one of

the Austrian border patrol soldiers gave him 20 schillings for a telegram, telling him “Go ahead and do it.” We regretted years later that we could not repay him because we did not ask him for his name. The next day we were transferred to Wollensdorf Lager (refugee camp), which was sponsored by the British.

Life in the Refugee Camps

After a month at the Wollensdorf Lager, we were transferred again, with the assistance of the Charitas help organization, to Klosterneuburg Lager, outside Vienna. The help organization (Rettet das Kind) aided us in enrolling my sister and me in the Sacre Coeur School for Girls, in Pressbaum, located in the Vienna Woods. This was about one and a half hour from Vienna.

My grandmother in Hungary tried to help us out financially. We later found out that she sold all of our furniture that we left behind, donated some items to family members and our washing machine was given to our relative in Szombathely. She exchanged the money into foreign currency (British pounds) on the black market. Then she had a seamstress sew the money into the shoulder of my father's suit jacket. She gave the jacket to a mutual friend, who was on an official business trip to Austria. This friend delivered the jacket to us. Unbeknown to him, the message to us was to let her know if the shoulder of the jacket fit properly. This is how she got the money to us.

During our Lager life, we had mail contact with our grandparents. The exception was my Dad's father, who could never forgive our leaving the homeland. He never wrote or signed his name on a letter to us. At that time we did not realize his reason until many years later; we were told of this by family members. Unfortunately, he passed away in 1958.

In the summer of 1958, my sister and I took a trip sponsored by the Rettet das Kind organization to Chelmsford, England, with a group of other refugee children. Each child was taken in by various British families for a period of two months. By this time, we spoke fluent German, but no English. Mind you, we were totally without our parents at 9 and 10 years of age, in the home of a British family, and we could not speak or understand a word of the British language. My sister cried many times and wanted to go back to our parents.

Back in Austria, my parents had applied at the U.S. Embassy to immigrate to the United States, but it was denied, since the refugee quota was closed and we had no sponsors. The political atmosphere and instability in Europe and the cold war gave us a scary feeling, with the thought that the Soviets could invade Austria as they had done before. Therefore we had to select from the countries that were still receiving a reduced number of refugees. These were England, Canada, Australia and countries in South America. My Mom's brother was already living in Canada. My family escaped from Hungary before them, but they had made it to Canada (through Yugoslavia) before us. They insisted that we come to Canada. Canada was taking two more groups of refugees, so we decided to apply and very quickly we were accepted. Our thoughts, hopes and dreams were that someday, somehow, we would make it to the United States.

After a 12-day boat trip across the ocean, we embarked in Montreal, Canada. The Canadian government took care of our temporary accommodations and expenses by putting us up at the local jailhouse. This was an extremely disappointing shock to us, not to mention highly discouraging. My parents had to apply at the Immigration Office to select available employment possibilities. They suggested a job as a cook for my Mom and chauffeur for my Dad. My sister and I were placed into a boarding school in the city of Ottawa. Because of the separation of our family and having seen our crying faces, after 3 days my Dad came to get us and took us back to Montreal. He argued with the immigration authorities about separating our family, when we had been together all this time. Both my parents found jobs, and after 2 weeks we left the jailhouse to start a life of our own. My sister and I were enrolled in school, though not in our proper grades, but first grade, until we learned the English language. Eventually, my Dad became a draftsman and my Mom a bookkeeper. After 5 years, we received our Canadian citizenship.

The Dream Comes True

One day, my Dad noticed an advertisement in the newspaper of a U.S. company looking for technically experienced personnel. My Dad passed the application test with excellent results. The company representative shook my father's hand and said to him, “Welcome to the United State.” My father was extremely happy to say the least. Within 5-6 months, we received out first preference quotas to immigrate to the United States. The company moved us to Beloit, Wisconsin. This was a

booming time in the U.S. for technically experienced people. After two years, my father obtained a better job offer and promotion as design draftsman in Cleveland, Ohio. The new company moved our family to Cleveland in 1966. We were happy about coming to settle in Cleveland, because of its good location and its Hungarian ethnic population. This has been our home ever since. It was here that we had the memorable occasion of receiving our U.S. citizenship. By coincidence, that day happened to be the same day that we had crossed the Hungarian-Austrian border.

Every year the Cleveland Hungarians commemorate October 23, 1956. The Takács family participates to keep the memories alive and to never forget.

Martha and Kathy Takács

Martha graduated from Cleveland State University with a B.S. degree in chemistry. She began her career as a chemist at the Cleveland Electric Illuminating Company, and held various positions such as chemistry supervisor, licensing engineer/environmentalist, and QA auditor at the Company's Perry Nuclear Plant. After 23 years of service, she took early retirement. Since then, she has continued working for chemical and pharmaceutical companies and has done other contracting work. In the 1970's she took part in ethnic programs at the annual Cleveland Nationality Festivals as a folk dancer with a local Hungarian folk dancing group, and also performed as a solo pianist playing Franz Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2.

Kathy attended Cleveland State University and studied English and French literature. In 1969 she went to Paris, France, where she took a one-year course of French literature and civilization at the Alliance Francaise Ecole Internationale. She married and has two daughters. She works for the City of Cleveland, at Hopkins International Airport, where she utilizes not only her knowledge of the French language, but also Hungarian. She has assisted many Hungarians, especially the elderly, who visit from Hungary and do not speak English.