

# Hungarians return to Powell River mill

## Forestry students who immigrated to Canada in 1957 first landed in small town

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**FULL CIRCLE:** Catalyst Paper Corporation president and chief executive officer Joe Nemeth [left] and his father Joseph Nemeth recently attended a reunion of Sopron Forestry School alumni. The Hungarians landed in Powell River in 1957 to learn English. Jason Schreurs photo

A group of more than 40 alumni of Hungary's Sopron Forestry School, who first landed as immigrants in Powell River before attending University of BC, recently returned to the place where they were welcomed to Canada nearly 60 years ago.

Nearly 250 students and faculty from the forestry school fled Hungary in 1957 to escape Soviet rule. Needing a place to stay when UBC was unable to house them, owners of Powell River Paper Company took in the students for several months as they were taught English by Powell River residents.

“We owe a great deal of thanks to the company at that time. Through its generosity, we were offered bunkhouses at the mill and the company made all of the necessary arrangements to accommodate all of us, including a kitchen,” said alumnus Joseph Nemeth. “So we decided we should come back to Powell River after almost 60 years.”

A banquet took place on Thursday, September 8, at Town Centre Hotel and a tour of Catalyst Paper Corporation was held on Friday, September 9.

The now-owners of the mill have a special link to the Sopron alumni; Joseph is the father of Catalyst president and chief executive officer Joe Nemeth, who also attended the reunion.

“It’s not something I could have planned or expected, but what makes this special is this is more than a professional engagement for me; this is personal,” said Joe. “This is a group that the Canadian government and the Powell River Paper Company opened its arms to and brought in as refugees. The Hungarian group’s presence made us a better province; they raised forestry practices through the roof.”

The Sopron Division of UBC’s forestry faculty was established in the fall of 1957 after the students and faculty had spent several months in Powell River.

“The Powell River mill provided an absolutely critical role in providing that interim point that enabled these students to come here, get settled, begin to understand Canadian culture and practise the language,” said UBC Faculty of Forestry dean John Innes. “It’s that interim stage that is often so important with new immigrants.”

According to Innes, the Hungarian students ended up changing the scope of forestry in BC after graduating in 1961, bringing in progressive practices around tending and researching forests that previously had not been prevalent in the province. Nearly 30 per cent of the Hungarian immigrants were women, added Innes, something that was unheard of at UBC at the time.

Sopron alumni member Lehel Porpaczky remembers fondly the short time he spent in Powell River back in 1957. While in town for the reunion he said he barely recognized Powell River compared to what it was like six decades ago.

“It was very quiet here then. We had our own food prepared by Hungarians and spent our time learning English. The people from the town were the ones who taught us,” said Porpaczky. “The memories of Powell River still choke me up. It was very nice here.”

Catalyst’s Powell River division vice-president and general manager Fred Chinn said events such as the Hungarian reunion are great examples of how Catalyst celebrates and honours the heritage of the communities it belongs to.

“This is a big moment for us. It’s part of the history of the mill and the forestry in the area,” said Chinn. “This Hungarian group was given a chance to progress through university and have a life in Canada and contribute to the forestry industry. And with our president and CEO being related to that whole history, it is very exciting to be part of this event.”

Sopron alumni have remained close to this day, according to Joseph. The group, which still meets every month in Vancouver, were able to form that bond partly due to their time in Powell River, he said.

“They did such a fabulous job and we are still grateful to this day; they looked after us so well,” said Joseph. “I would not be honest to say everything was smooth; we were starting a life in a country where we had practically nothing. To this day, we are still very grateful to the people in Powell River who helped and taught us, and the company that took us in.”