People

The Sopron People

by **Gordon Price**

Fleeing a totalitarian regime, the two hundred forestry students, thirty faculty and seventy dependents left everything behind for an uncertain future in a land of freedom.

In 1956 the USSR was in the midst of crushing the Hungarian Revolution. On the western border of Hungary, in the small city of Sopron nestled in the foothills of the Alps, almost an entire university — students, professors and their families — had organized to resist the 2,000-tank Soviet invasion.

Since World War II the iron curtain had isolated Hungary from the rest of Europe; the country's traditions and customs had been deliberately suppressed. Moreover, the Hungarian language had no relationship to the languages of its neighbours, not even to the Austrians three miles away.

Sopron University itself was the product of war. Following World War I and the division of the Austro-Hungarian Empire into separate nations, the students and professors of the forestry university in Selmec, which had just become part of newly created Czechoslovakia, migrated to Budapest and then on to Sopron in order to remain within the new borders of Hungary.

In Hungary, as it was throughout Europe, forestry was a profession of great prestige, and the University of Sopron reflected that pride. Students had maintained traditions going back over a century; student clubs, uniforms, songs and ceremonies were part of the everyday life. Almost all of the forestry faculty had themselves been active members of the student clubs. Life at Sopron consequently was familial, rooted in patriotism and tradition.

The communist regime tried to change all that. Mass meetings replaced banquets, ideology replaced education. "Unreliable" professors were simply replaced. Student clubs were outlawed. "A happy era was buried indeed," recall Oscar Sziklai and Laszlo Adamovich, the authors of a book on the Sopron years entitled *Foresters in Exile*. "It seemed so hopeless, so grey, so unnatural, that a great lethargy gripped everyone. One did not trust even old friends . . . ."

But a decade of indoctrination had failed to overcome a century of tradition.

The events of 1956 first begin as spring breezes. Following the first uprisings against the communist regime in Budapest, the students at Sopron quickly form a revolutionary committee. They arrest the communist officials and take control of the town. With one cannon, they defend the exposed northern access leading to the gates of Sopron.

Soon the harsh, cold reality of winter blows away their hopes. The Soviets invade. The fight, of course, is futile. As blood spills in Budapest where the fighting is intense, a meeting is called by the student leaders in a clearing on the slopes of Sopron's forests. After some debate, the inevitable decision is made: they, the professors and their families will flee through the barbed-wire fences and minefields to refuge across the border.

There is little time to pack. Dinners are left on the table; goodbyes are few. But there is hope. The West will surely support the revolution; it will only be a matter of time before all will return.

The Western powers, however, decide to maintain their neutrality. To avoid the appearance of partisanship, the Austrians even arrest some of the students carrying small arms. The rest of the Soproners are split among various refugee camps.

Now the situation is desperate; no home, no money, no going back. Knowledge is their only luggage, but there is a determination to remain together, to continue as a school. Sopron in exile. A plea is sent to 30 different countries for a new home. An answer is received, but it means moving to a land on the other side of the world, a land with a completely different language, institutions and culture — a move that would close off, at least for the foreseeable future — and maybe forever — a return home.

That was the situation that faced the students and professors of the University of Sopron when they made the decision to come to British Columbia.

"They were lonely and upset, and wondered if they had done the right thing. They had little or no communication with Canadians because of the language, and so could not really understand how our system worked. It was a time of great trial for them, and there were times when we weren't as sympathetic as we might have been."

That is how Fred McNeil recalls those initial days in 1957 when the Hungarians arrived at a camp in Powell River. McNeil was working for Harold Foley, an owner of the Powell River Company. Foley had been approached by Jack Pickersgill, the Canadian Minister of Immigration, who recognized in the Sopron dilemma a unique opportunity for Canada to gain the skills and knowledge of a complete forestry faculty. But a place was needed for the Soproners to stay until they could be

Return Address:
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nty-five years ago they fled
tarianism in Hungary; B.C. has
fited ever since. *by Gordon Price*

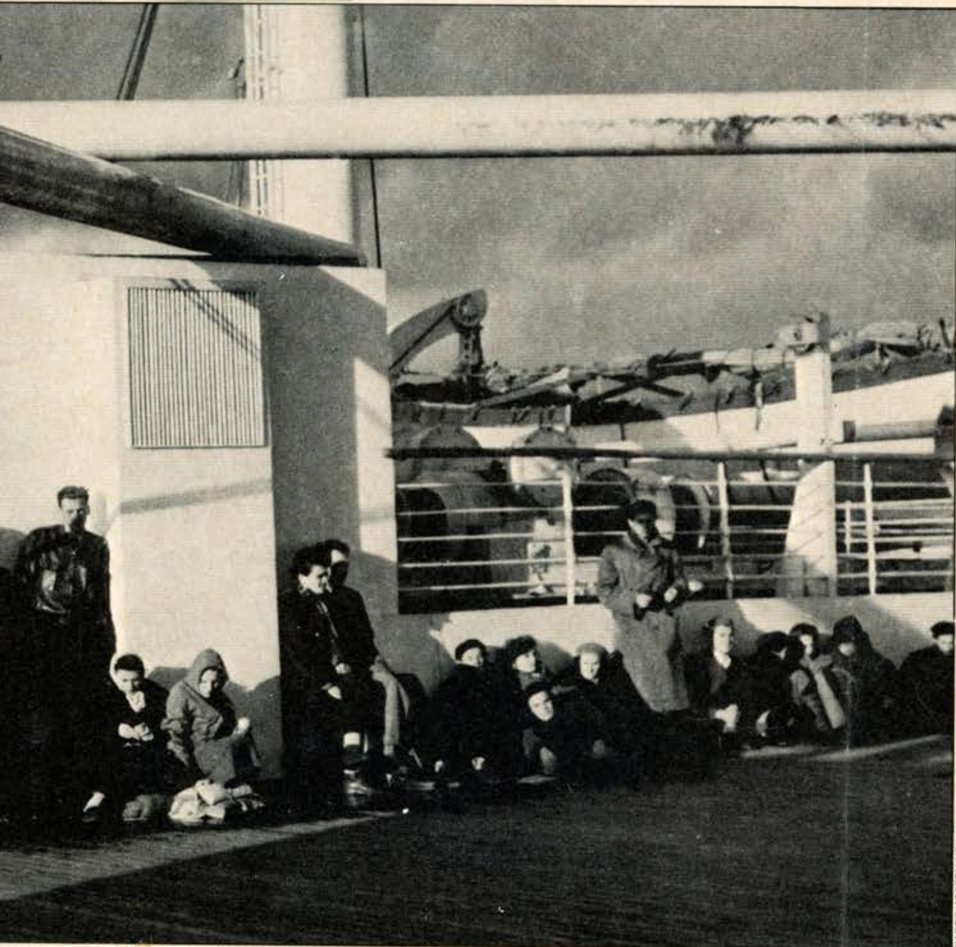

PHOTO: JOSEPH HEJJAS

To reach Canada the Sopron people weathered a cold Atlantic crossing from Liverpool.

transferred to the University of British Columbia. Foley made a decision within an hour to offer Powell River as a temporary home.

The Hungarians arrived in the winter of 1957 after a freezing train trip, their views of this vast, vacant land restricted to half-minute glimpses as they blew hot air on the windows.

The decision to come to Canada had not been taken enthusiastically. Oscar Sziklai, a Sopron professor still teaching at UBC, recalls with distaste the ostentatious Cadillac from the Canadian embassy that brought officials to meet with them in their Austrian camps. A film from the Powell River Company on their operations was viewed as propaganda. A visit to British Columbia was required, led by Sopron's dean Kalman Roller.

It was George Allen, the dean of forestry at UBC, who finally convinced them to come. He was a man they could trust, recalls Sziklai, "a gentleman completely."

The government provided only $3 a day per person for expenses; there were misunderstandings and not a little bitterness. The townsfolk in Powell River were skeptical It was a measure of the discipline and determination of the Soproners that, according to McNeil: "They dug in and helped themselves. They ran the camp themselves; they did their own cooking and serving — and had money left over. They started off very well by putting on a concert in the community. The Powell River people, after their initial reluctance, really pitched in and helped them."

By fall they were ready to start classes. It had been decided that a separate "Sopron school" would be established at UBC and the students would study and graduate together. But in 1957 UBC was overcrowded; classes had to be held in the evenings. Learning the English language was the major challenge to be overcome, and even summer jobs were hard to find.

The Soproners, though isolated and disoriented, overcame each obstacle and graduated three-quarters of their forestry class within four years. (Some of the students chose different professions.) All, without exception, became Canadian citizens, providing this country with an incalculable gain of specialized knowledge.

The Hungarians had to deal with a host of cultural and linguistic differences, large and small. Frank Pendl, now with the Ministry of Forests, remembers the efficiency of the post office compared to European standards. Others were surprised at Christmas lights on houses, even the way dinner was served. For the women it was less amusing: although the head of the fourth-year Sopron class was a woman, female foresters were unheard of in British Columbia; their jobs were restricted to clerical positions. Only two of the female Soproners remain in the forestry profession — Elizabeth Juhasz, an engineer with the Ministry of Forests engineering branch, and Edith Andody, a forester with the ministry's inventory branch.

Hungarians had to cope with another aspect of British Columbia that to them was completely alien — the forest. They had come to a country where virgin timber was being harvested under rugged conditions; their experience was with the careful management of relatively small, estate-like holdings. Oscar Sziklai remembers his first impressions: "In Hungary we knew every tree in our forest. My father could detect a single stolen tree from the forest he was overseeing. Suddenly we were faced with trees as high as a church tower, five times bigger than what we knew. The left-over wood on logged-off areas was beyond our comprehension. In Hungary everything above two inches was picked up.

"It took a few years to understand the forest practices of a pioneering country. We couldn't agree with it, but we could understand it. I would like to believe our influence had some effect on forest operations."

Julius Juhasz, now head of the Ministry of Forests' Timber Management Branch, also recalls that perspective: "People in Hungary were prepared to dig up stumps in the forest if they could have half of them in return. In B.C. we saw six-foot stumps and logged-over areas with more fibre on it than in our entire forest."

That was 25 years ago. "Today," notes Sziklai, whose son is the fifth generation of foresters in the family, "tremendous strides have been made towards intensive forest management, and commitment to tree improvement in B.C. is outstanding, even by world standards."

Speaking at a banquet earlier this year honouring the 25th anniversary of the arrival of the Sopron school in B.C., Dr. Norman McKenzie, a past president of UBC, reflected on the Sopron story: "I have never been able to think of the incident except as one of the greatest immigrant dividends this country has ever had."

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