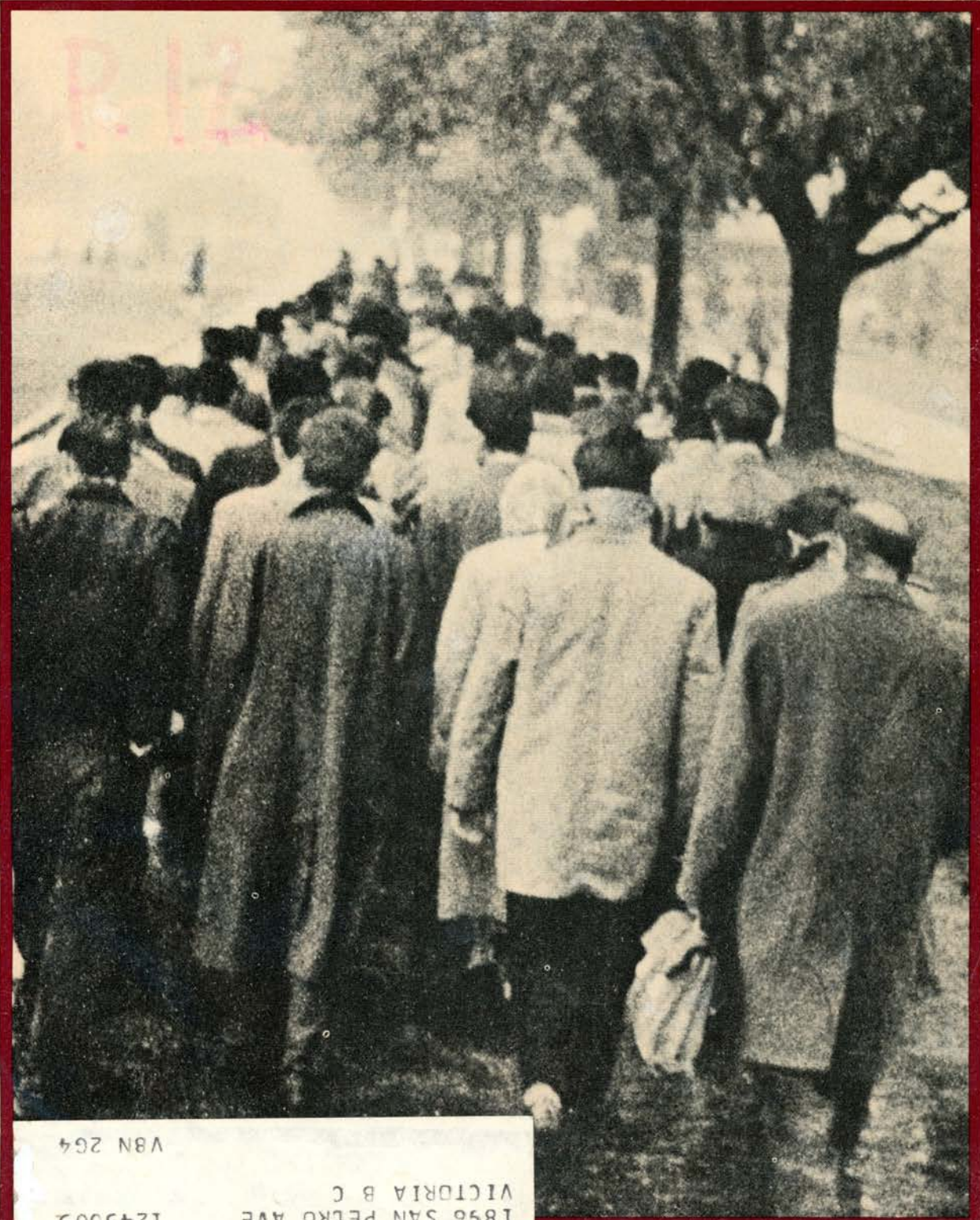


CHRONICLE

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Memories of Sopron
Twenty-five Years After
Exile

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A solemn campus march on October 23, 1957, the first anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution.

Memories of Sopron

Revolution, Exile and a New Life at UBC

Dianne Longson

In 1956 Russian tanks rumbled towards a small town in western Hungary. People at Sopron University had only a few moments to make one of the most difficult decisions of their lives. Should they surrender or escape risking everything for an ideal? They abandoned classrooms, homes and possessions, seeking refuge and freedom.

The story of 200 students and 28 teachers of the Sopron Faculty of Forestry reads like an episode from a war movie. But when one of these foresters-in-exile produces the small worn book bag that had contained all his worldly possessions - a felt hat, an electric razor, three Swiss chocolate bars, a Hungarian-German dictionary - the chilling reality finally sinks in.

However, January 11, 1982 was a time for celebration. Two hundred and fifty Sopron alumni and friends filled the banquet hall of the Koerner Graduate Student Centre to commemorate the 25th anniversary of their mass flight from Hungary. The story of the Sopron University Faculty of Forestry from exile, in Austria, to immigration to Canada and UBC is a proud and dramatic one.

The situation was tense with the Russian Army very close to the Austrian border (Austrian neutrality had been declared just the year before). Forestry Dean Kalman Roller mailed urgent letters to 20 national governments seeking refuge for the 330 foresters and their families. As news of events in Hungary reverberated throughout the world, Canadian minister of immigration, Jack Pickersgill flew to Vienna to find out what Canada could do.

On hearing about the Sopron foresters, Pickersgill immediately saw the opportunities for the group in British Columbia's developing forest industry. He phoned a B.C. federal cabinet minister, James Sinclair, who went to see UBC president, Dr. Norman MacKenzie that morning. By afternoon UBC forestry dean, Dr. George S. Allen, Harold and Joe Foley, directors of the Powell River Pulp and Paper Company (later merged with MacMillan Bloedel), and a company officer, Fred MacNeil congregated at the President's home on UBC campus. It was decided that the Sopron group be accommodated for the first while at Powell River and that

the UBC Faculty of Forestry would begin preparations to include a Sopron Division. Soon after Allen and MacNeil flew to Vienna to extend a formal invitation to them to come to Canada. Kalman Roller and three students came to Vancouver to consider the opportunities and difficulties of moving so far from home.

In the minds of many Sopron foresters Christmas 1956 stands out as one of the most dismal days ever spent. Some had fled without being able to tell their families and now they had no way of getting word to them. Others had hoped they would be in exile only a short time before returning to a free Hungary. And none ever imagined they would have to leave Hungary so far behind. Finally they set sail for Canada aboard the Empress of Britain on New Year's Eve, arriving in St. John, N.B. on January 8, 1957.

Leslie Safranyik and Imre Otvos, at 18, were the youngest of the group. Safranyik was one who had fled without telling his family. It was a month before he could get a message to them.

Both Safranyik and Otvos agree that they had an easier adjustment than many of the older Sopron exiles. Says Safranyik, "However bad the situation is in your country, it is very hard to leave," adding that he always missed the love and support of his immediate family. But when the time came, a choice had to be made. "It was politically wise to leave," says Otvos, "people were continually disappearing. For personal safety it was wise for everyone to leave."

The Hungarian Uprising had begun in Budapest on October 23, with a solemn student march in support of the Polish people. For 12 days the battle continued, mostly in the streets of Budapest. Away from the fighting the Sopron students sent medicine, blood, food and other supplies to the city. Then came the news that 2,000 Soviet tanks were on the way to crush the revolution. No one could believe it. It was devastating for the Hungarians, who with their newly-won freedom, hoped for some form of peaceful reconciliation with the Soviets.

Color and kindness marked the arrival in Canada. Safranyik remembers there was color everywhere - in people's clothing - in the vibrant hues of Hudson Bay blankets and "I was constantly impressed and amazed by the sincere concern for our well-being

They came with their possessions in a few bags and packages, the children carrying their favorite toys, to a foreign but welcoming campus.

- it was everywhere we went." On the train ride across Canada Otvos became more and more impressed by the size of the country, and on reaching B.C., by the size of the trees!

Today Safranyik holds a doctorate in forest population dynamics and works for the Canadian Forestry Service Pacific Division in Victoria. Otvos, with a Ph.D. in forest entomology, has experienced the vastness of Canada firsthand, working in every province but one. Now a colleague of Safranyik, he says, "Before I graduated (from Berkeley, Calif.), I knew I wanted to return to Canada. I felt I should come back and pay my debt to Canada where I had been given a home and freedom."

After a brief stop in Abbotsford, B.C., the foresters moved on to Powell River. The timing was right. The Foleys had recently finished installing new equipment and an extension to the pulp and paper operation. The living quarters of the construction crew were available and large enough to

house everyone. The group would not have to be broken up.

Powell River Camp Manager, Vincent Forbes, took charge and quickly provided for the immediate necessities - English lessons and a Hungarian kitchen. Forbes did everything possible to help the group become accustomed to the new ways of Canadian society. As often as possible, UBC instructors visited the camp to lecture on Canadian forestry.

Through the efforts of many people, most of the Sopron students found summer jobs to finance their education at UBC. The campus was ready for them. One army hut had already been designated "The Sopron Division."

Although the group was part of the UBC forestry faculty, it retained its own curriculum and teaching methods. But because of this and their large number, evening classes had to be scheduled. Minor course changes were introduced to conform to UBC practice, but the Sopron tradition of oral exams



continued, including a final comprehensive examination before the full teaching body.

The first year brought many frustrations. Unfamiliar language and customs, anxiety over oppression of family and friends back home.

For two of the older members of the Sopron group, Lajos Witt, now 83, and his wife Frances, the adjustment to Canada was a formidable challenge, particularly the language. "In my heart I still have a very close connection to the old country. I cannot get rid of my Hungarian heritage." However, he quickly asserts, "We have no desire to go back. We appreciate freedom much more."

As head of the Forest Research Institute in Sopron, Witt taught wildlife and fish management as an adjunct professor in the Faculty of Forestry. On his arrival in Vancouver, he taught the same course and later accepted the position of curator at the UBC department of zoology, where he added over 5,000 specimens to the department's collection. A new sub-species of the American Goldfinch was discovered by one of the doctoral



seven women in that first class. At spring congregation the students wore the Hungarian national colors (red, green and white) on their forestry hoods and their diplomas were amended to read: "The Faculty of Forestry, Sopron Division; Bachelor of Science in Forestry (equivalent to Okleveles Erdömérnök, Graduate Forest Engineer, from Sopron University, Hungary)."

UBC was ready for the refugees, with a new sign on a campus hut for their first campus visit.

... (below) The Class of '59 on the steps of the old forestry building.

the Sopron group would not lose contact with each other, the Sopron Alumni Association began the newsletter, the "Kapocs" in 1966. "The Link" is published twice yearly by a rotating editorial board. Besides the various alumni class reunions, an annual banquet is held. The Sopron Foundation, established in 1969, honors the late Dr. George S. Allen and the tremendous contribution he made to helping the Hungarian foresters adapt to their new life. Interest from a fund established by the foundation provides an annual scholarship for the undergraduate achieving the highest mark in forest genetics.

The tributes to UBC's Sopron foresters flowed freely during the 25th Anniversary evening. Tom Waterland, provincial minister of forests, said that never before had B.C. acquired so many experts in the field of forestry at one time. The province greatly appreciated the Sopron contribution. Retired UBC Vice President, Dr. Geoff Andrews, speaking on behalf of President MacKenzie said that the Sopron foresters were one of the greatest immigrant dividends Canada had ever received.

But it was Dean Kalman Roller speaking to his "extended Sopron family," who touched on the spirit of the Sopron alumni. He told the group he had no doubt but that the spirit of the Soprons would withstand the test of time. "In 25 years, I'm sure someone will stand here where I now stand." And it's certain, that even then, the thoughts will be of Hungary, Canada and UBC.

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students who worked with him. He named it after the curator -*Spinus Spaltria Witt*.

Witt carefully points out that forestry is a tradition in Hungary reaching back in many cases through three and four generations. He encouraged the students to revive old school traditions that had been disallowed under communist rule. Lagging spirits soon revived. Not long after settling at UBC, the school celebrated the 150th anniversary of its founding.

Thirteen months after their arrival in Canada, the first 28 students graduated. Edith Andody was one of

Andody was one female forester who found work right after graduation with the B.C. Ministry of Forestry. She and 23 Sopron colleagues fill positions in the various branches of the ministry.

Of the 200 Sopron students, 142 graduated between 1957 - 61. The majority are employed in the B.C. forest industry, but others have spread out across Canada, into the United States and Europe. Four, including the associate dean, are members of the UBC forestry faculty. Some branched out and entered professions as varied as medical doctor and restaurateur.

In 1961, UBC's Sopron division closed its doors. So that members of