

**I do remember '56. One must not forget it.** Yes, I remember as if it happened today. Yes, I do remember when I experienced freedom for the first time. I remember that our joy was second only to our enthusiasm. I remember when we first heard the news that demonstrators took the streets of Budapest. I remember when we broke into the local prison in Győr to facilitate the release of the political prisoners, of whom there were many. How could I forget when the ÁVO, the Hungarian secret police, fired on us as they rolled in with a huge truck and we tried to escape through the construction paraphernalia, deep ditch, forms for the concrete pouring etc. As the train station and its facilities were enlarged, fixed, rebuilt, we, or I should say the lucky few who were blessed with a small skinny body squeezed through the iron fence, bruises and scrapes on our bodies, missing buttons from our clothing were the evidence of our struggle in trying to get away from the lethal scene. I remember, and I can't forget this even decades later; we gathered ourselves again the next day. We marched en masse toward the headquarters of the ÁVO. Of course, we entered through the back door and demanded (those were giant words then) and I mean demanded, the release of the messengers from Budapest and the release of the individual dossiers that they kept on basically every adult in Hungary. The situation turned ugly, since they were the only ones with weapons, but we had the masses behind us. Yes, behind us in more than one sense. I was looking through a protective iron grate and the ÁVO's machine guns stuck into my gut, with threatening words "Back off or I'll shoot! Besides, we already requested reinforcements ..." and he continued to ramble on still in a threatening voice. Soon we could see fear in his eyes. I too collected all my strength and calmly, with a rather strong voice I told him it's impossible, since we cut the phone lines. What else could I have told him? There was no way to back off. Behind me was the crowd-the students, the workers, and many of Győr's citizens. They just pressed on. We succeeded in our quest of getting in. We sent out the occupants, and then started feeding the large bonfire whose flames seemed to enjoy burning the unwanted documents that the ÁVO amassed. The smoke, the ashes rose not much faster than our spirits celebrating this newly acquired freedom of ours. The fate of the ÁVO was not pretty. We could not protect them from the crowd's angers, not only angry words, but blows both by hand and foot. It seemed as if no one cared or felt sorry for them. They deserved punishment, but it should not have been administered to them by the crowd. I sure do remember all this. I remember as the crowd punched and kicked them. I remember because I can't forget it. I remember because for decades I had nightmares about it and I do remember all my dreams. I used to go home in my dreams, but before I had a chance to hug my parents and siblings, the ÁVO came. Their dastardly actions, their cruel, rude behavior scared me. I knew them. With bloodthirsty eyes, open mouths with fangs and sarcasm in every word they spoke, they started chasing me. I tried and tried to escape, but all was in vain. My legs were solidly anchored

to the ground. My wings (yes, I had wings, and I could fly in my dreams) were clipped. The trench was too wide, the water too turbulent and deep, the snakes were biting and / or spewing poison. On top of all this, the searchlights were aiming their reflectors at me and caused temporary blindness. I saw my mom as my father was holding her back from trying to help me escape from the swamp and its nasty inhabitants. I tried to warn her not to come, but I was voiceless. No sound came from my throat. God only knows how many times I woke up from my nightmares, soaked, voiceless, crying without tears only to be consoled by my wife, who gently shook my shoulders to awaken me from this horrible torture. There times when I assumed it was the hangman's hand putting the noose on my neck and I violently attacked her. Suddenly I heard the sharp sound of the gun ... Oh the relief as I woke up from my dreams! The nightmares were still racing in my mind. I had to tell her. She was always a polite and patient listener. Many times I fell back to sleep as she was holding me in her arms. Sure, I remember as a young student representative at the revolutionary council, taking information or news to the radio station and the wire service (MTI). I first went on foot, later I was armed with an official permit to stop and request transportation from any vehicle. I remember, since it's impossible to forget the Red Star falling down from the top of the obelisk at the bus station. Because I was there. I was the one who managed to get a rope around it, while my compatriots tied the other end to a tractor and succeeded in pulling it down. My antics with the star made me a bit of a star myself. As much as we enjoyed it then, we regretted it considerably more later because as the saying goes, we were caught red-handed (no pun intended) by the city's official photographer.

I remember the darkness that befell on Győr one early November night. The electricity was shut down all night, nothing moved, nothing happened in the total darkness. Only the rising sun brought light to the city. We worked the hand-cranked copy machine, churning out leaflets to inform the Mongol-looking Russian soldiers about our intentions. We had no bones to pick with them, only with the system, the tyrant, the communists, the Soviets. Little did we know then that they could not even read. Some simply could not read, some could not read the Latin alphabet, so while some were looking for the Suez Canal or Berlin, the others could not even decipher our Cyrillic letter flyers. I was arrested, interrogated, and in a mock trial (I didn't know then) was sentenced to death. The "sentence" was carried out on my derriere, where a kick by a huge Russian boot propelled me down, tumbling to the bottom of the 32-step entrance of the city hall. I can still hear their loud laugh, and see their ugly faces and the fire of hate emanating from their eyes. I accepted my teacher's recommendation to go home and lay low for a while in my hometown, which is the small village of Markotabodge. Even God had a hard time remembering where this small village was, so I felt safe. "It's vacation time," I said to everyone "There is no coal as usual", I explained to anyone who inquired why I was home. One day, my grandfather rushed back from the city demanding to know in front of my mom what I had done. "Why are your pictures plastered everywhere? Why are you a wanted man? What horrible things have you done?" My mother just looked at me

and quietly said “I can not and will not send you away from home, but at this time I’m afraid to ask you to stay. I suddenly just hugged and kissed her. We quickly got my little sister home from school. She was only a little girl. Thirty four years later I questioned her, but she had no recollection of any of these events. I had to wait and I mean I HAD to wait 34 years for a chance to return. I was approached and my services solicited by a Hungarian spy, whom I reported to the FBI. He mysteriously died a few months later, so how could I have gone home with these happenings? Thirty four years later, in 1989, the Hungarian communist party declared its dissolution. The Berlin wall came down, due in no small part to the Hungarians, and we finally had free elections in Hungary. Finally, I could go home too. We got our passports, my wife and I and started the journey.

RETURNED. Returned to my homeland, my country of origin. Hungary. Back to our God-forsaken village of Markotabödöge. Back to see my mother, father, brother, sister, my loved ones. The relatives, the memories, the Village. It was relatively easy to recognize my country along with my little village. My little village had everything except for size. A lot of people were missing from the few inhabitants and almost all were still poor. Just like in the olden days, but they were free again. We spent thirty unforgettable days at home. We had woven the days and nights into one and exchanged our stories about the past thirty four years, extending it backwards to my earlier years, my childhood years. We had also seen a remarkable collection of cities, churches, museums, castles, natural wonders and man-made monuments. At one of the visits to Győr, we toured the city with a taxi, looking up some of my favorite teachers and revisiting important sites. The taxi driver took delight in explaining the curious statue of three Russian soldiers holding on to one flag “The western winds were rather strong” he said. “They were hanging on for dear life. In ’56, during the ill-fated revolution, there was a tall obelisk and humungous Red Star on top of it. The crowd tried to bring it down without any success until a little blond kid made a lasso out of a rope and heaved it up and tied the other end to a tractor. You should have been there to hear as the crowd roared in approval. I can never forget that scene and I can still see the little guy, who must have been one of the students from the local high school.” “So can I”, I thought to myself. “I was there. I was him.” Suddenly I felt my wife squeezing my hand, telling me in English “No, don’t tell him, don’t tell him that the little guy was you.” She confessed later that she never really believed my story. Now she had proof. The thirty days went by with super sonic speed. We had an immeasurably good time. Since then, we have returned several times, although my mother and father are in eternal rest. “Blessed or cursed”, says the poem (Áldjon Vagy Verjen A Sors Keze – M. Vörösmarty). “You were born here, and here is where you have to die.” Well, I lived here in America for 34 years. I was worse off than an orphan. My parents were alive, but I couldn’t see them. My children were born here. They live here. This is their home. The poem, if applicable, applies to them. Why should I create orphans of them? I also adore my children’s children. I still make an occasional visit to see my sister. I will take in some sights as well. I will always visit my mom’s and dad’s graves, but I wish to remain here with my children and friends.

## **MARKOTABÖDÖGE**

A quaint little village nearly 1,000 inhabitants in 1956, now numbering less than half that. It's on the northwest corner of Hungary, near the Austrian border. Very near in fact. It was considered to be within the border zone, which meant that you had to have a personal identification card - a passport-like document - with you as you traveled in and out of the zone. My uncle worked for the government as a dike inspector and I myself was a water boy as they dredged the river Rápca and the Hanság Canal. I am just trying to give some background as to how I came to be familiar with the Hanság region, a swampy, unfriendly almost no-man's land. In fact, the Russians used the region for their bombing exercises. I started my departure with my uncle. It was the two of us pedaling our bikes. My father was not far behind us with his tool sack on his back, fearing retribution from the Communists. There were hundreds and hundreds of people trekking through our village, escaping, hoping to reach the West. Many of them were totally exhausted by the time they reached us. And my mother kept inviting them for scrambled eggs, bread, and water. We never really had any milk. Therefore water was the thirst quencher. The few hens we had worked overtime to produce the eggs. Along with a friend, we guided quite a few people to freedom. In one particular case, a totally exhausted young couple came into our house. Sure, my mother was standing out front and invited all in who seemed to need nourishment or help. My friend and I were charmed into giving them a bicycle ride to the border. To our surprise, they gave us a large sum of money at the border, reasoning that it will have no value outside of Hungary. They also gave me a letter with an emotional request to please send it to their parents to let them know that they escaped or successfully left Hungary. I was already in America when my mother sent me a photo of an elegant motorcycle, which was the parents' gift to me, fulfilling the wishes of their son for helping them in their time of need. Anyway, our travel towards the border was uneventful. The goodbye from my father was very difficult. We didn't talk during the trip. I'm sure he was preoccupied with similar thoughts as mine. I was deep in thought about my future. The sentimental song about the émigrés leaving their homeland resounded through my head .. *"elmegyek, elmegyek, hosszú utra megyek ..."* *"I'm a goin' goin' Far away a goin' ..."*

Where? How? And from what am I going to provide for myself? Will I be able to continue my education? After all, I was one of the very few whom after 1,000 years of existence of my village had a chance to go to high school. I always thought I was the first, but I'm sure there were others, not many, but there may have been some before me. Is the border still open? Can I still enter Austria? My whole life flashed in front of me in an instant. The mischiefs of my childhood ... the memories of World War II ... the German and Russian occupations of my village ... fishing in the Keszegér which separated Markota from Bödöge ... my

first years in Győr in the high school (High School with intensive training in construction technology) ... my first cigarette, wine, beer ... my first dance ... my first kiss ... my father's firm hand and my mother's chiding words, followed by praise, guidance, and love. I will have to miss all that?! Little did I know how much I will miss it. Who is going to say "Fiam, my son, what have you done now?" My brothers and sister, will I even see them again? And I already missed my little sister. Oh yes, I had plans running around in my mind already. We'll rekindle the revolutionary ideas. We will not let anyone or anything stand in the way. We won once, for two weeks and now all that seems too remote, so far away.

Petofi's poem was racing back and forth in my mind.

*Felül a gálya*

*Alul a viznek árja*

*Mégis a viz az úr.*

*Riding on top is the galleon.*

*Below are the raging waters*

*In spite of this, the water rules.*

Pushing and shoving tamer, kinder thoughts around. What am I going to do? How? Where? When suddenly and insistently, a gentle tap on my shoulder brings me back to reality. My uncle is saying his God Blesses, have a good trip, and trying to say good bye. His eyes welled with tears, his voice trembled and he didn't quite know what to do next. Ashamed of his indecision, his breakdown, he just hugged me almost breaking my ribs. He said "Go. Go and escape. At least you will be free. Don't ever forget who you are. The whole village was always so proud of you. Don't forget your roots, you are Hungarian. Stay that way. Go buster, and hold yourself to high standards. Just go." I did not have either the strength or the courage to cry.

*Búval és bánattal, kizsinoroztatam*

*Sűrű könnyeimmel kigomboztattatom.*

*All my grief and sorrow. Sadly twine around it*

*While my falling teardrops Buttons shining on it*

I had to go. It was a must. So I started my journey. I took a step back. I hesitated. I hugged him. I also cried, but I started moving toward the border to Austria. Oh this was such a long time ago. It was late November 1956. Such a long time ago. I was just a teenager then an aspiring young high school student. The gates of higher learning were open to me just a few weeks ago and now it all seemed lost. My dreams of becoming a university student suddenly perished. Am I dreaming all this? Will I wake up and find that this is not true? I don't know any foreign languages. That alone is an obstacle even if I try to learn one. How can I afford to educate myself? I need funds to live, live, live. I wanted to live. My legs kept

moving and moving. One foot in front of the other. Move, move. My heart started pounding louder and faster. My soul was longing for what I was leaving behind. My conscience was talking to me, the good and the bad sitting on separate shoulders, “go back, turn around” or “go, just go forward”. And I was walking without even looking back. I didn’t dare. I bowed my head and walked ahead. These few hundred yards were the longest journey of my life. But I just walked.

*Elindultam szép hazámból  
Hires kis Magyarországból  
Visszanéztem fél utamból  
Szemből a könny kicsordult*

*I have left my homeland  
I Left a famous little old land  
Sadly I turned once more to see.  
Through my falling tears, it's beauty.*

I tried to chase the other stanza out of my head.

*Bú ebédem bú vacsorám  
Boldogtalan minden óráim  
Nézem a csillagos eget  
Sirok alatta eleget*

*Jaj Istenem adjál szállást  
Mert meguntam a bujdosást  
Idegen földön a lakást.  
Éjjel nappal a sok sirást*

*Bitter food and bitter my days!* “Just let me have something to eat.” And I pressed on ...  
*On and on their bitter tang stays.* And the thoughts became pushy.  
*Tearfully I gaze at the sky.*  
*Numbering the stars as they die* I just want to live. Want to look at the sky filled with stars  
*Grant me Lord a shelter* and trusting in God I pressed forward.  
*A shelter of my own* I couldn’t even think of it then ...

*Tired of waiting  
Must I still roam?  
Living in strange lands  
All alone Alone*

I didn’t even arrive to a foreign land just yet. I kept going. Even to think about the end of the song was forbidden

*Éjjel nappal a sok sirást  
crying night and day for my home*

It was still day time. Sort of twilight, dusk, sunset. The night was falling with it. Any hope of returning going with it. The well-lit church spire was a welcoming sign so I picked up my pace and kept going. The reality of never returning became clearer and stronger. *Áldjon vagy verjen a sors keze. Be blessed or cursed by my destiny* came to my mind. It was an almost unbearable feeling, but I continued my journey. I had to go. I wanted to live and I wanted to be free. So I walked. I crossed the Hanság canal's broken down pedestrian bridge (read the [Bridge at Andau](#) by James Michener to get a feeling of crossing). I spent the night near the church, in a school house, where I met up with a few hometown friends. Our rain-soaked bodies loved the warmth of the school room and we enjoyed the warm cocoa that was served to us.

We were transported to Salzburg to Camp Roeder, a former American base which became our next home. Problems began to surface here. We were fed just once a day and the money we were supposed to get, a few shillings per week, was missing. There was an unusual mix of residents occupying the former military barracks. Street walkers from Budapest, whose aim was to create paradise to the multitude of Hungarian soldiers and of course providing a lot or a little love for those who wanted it and were able to afford the steep price they charged. The soldiers who crossed the border with weapons were detained in the stockade and were constantly teased by the prostitutes. Several families and individuals alike, like me, shared the huge barracks. Like sardines, we were squeezed into the rooms, but we each had one military issue bed. Sleeping, as badly as we needed it, was next to impossible. The cries, the prayers, the prostitutes' noise as they plied their trade would not permit it. We were constantly hungry. We got a small slice of bacon fat with bread at first, then the bread disappeared. The guy in charge of the food and the money must have become a rich man, although he was later arrested for swindling away the funds I almost had a heart attack one morning as I looked out on the window and saw a column of trucks with a five pointed star on the doors surrounding the base. They looked like the Russian trucks that brought their troops to Hungary just a few weeks ago. Then I noticed the color. White not red. Thank God. "Easy kid", said an elderly gentleman, "don't fret it, these are Americans, not Russians, the Russians copied the American trucks and mass-produced them." I knew that, but still my heart was racing. My mother's advice was still fresh in my mind. "Don't go too far, my son. Don't. It's going to be easier to come home when the system changes. Trust in God. He will help." By the end of November, we could no longer stay in Austria as refugees since they were inundated with hundreds of thousands of refugees already. The next logical place would have been Switzerland, but not knowing any of their languages, nor having an adult with me, and no high school diploma, my chances of emigrating there quickly evaporated. We were openly recruited by Australian agencies to settle there, but it was way too far, with basically no chance of ever returning. The scarcity of women also weighed heavily on my

decision not to go, even though dating and marrying was not the foremost priority at that time. I heard the song that many people were singing or humming. *Amerikában arany az élet, Amerikában so sincs sötét Golden is the life in America, life is never without light in America.* I thought “what do I have to lose?” The song is full of promises of a good life. What else could I have done?! I too joined the lines that were formed for preliminary screening for those who wanted to go to America. The operative word being preliminary. Very preliminary. Everyone wanted to go to America. But only a few had the chance and had the dream fulfilled (it took a special act of Congress to allow 32,000 Hungarian refugees to enter the United States. I was number 31,900. Standing in line and waiting for your turn had its advantages. All the warm soup you could consume. Some bowls even had meat in them, a luxury we didn’t have before. One of the officials asked for a volunteer to handle the entries through the door to keep the process orderly. No one volunteered, so I took it upon myself to do it. Then a couple weeks later, he asked me what I was doing. I told him I had volunteered, so I’m doing it since there was no one else interested in doing it. So I’m just fulfilling my promise. I was just a 150 pound skinny kid who was always cold, so being inside was not that bad. When he asked me where my parents and brothers and sister were, he was taken aback when I informed him that I was all by myself. He had an even more difficult time understanding that other than my briefcase, which I always had with me, with two books – math and history of architecture, plus a slide rule, I had nothing else. Not even an overcoat. The next few minutes went by in a flash. In and out of several rooms, his signature, my signature, both signatures on official looking papers, with just my name on it ... he waved a stethoscope, a thermometer, and a few other pieces of medical equipment in my general direction and kept saying how lucky I am that I have a great heartbeat, good eyesight, healthy lungs, excellent hearing etc. ... so “you’re not deaf or dumb, nor are you blind” with that he slammed the big seal on another piece of paper, “This will get you on the bus which is waiting for you outside to get you to Munich.” I still remember his firm, but warm handshake. I can still hear him “so long kid! Have a great journey, Godspeed.” And he sort of talked to himself, saying “his parents would be proud of this youngster, too bad he was forced to leave his homeland.” Startled, as if someone just woke me up, I continued my journey to Munich. We arrived at another American base, an air force base, where for the first time in my life I saw a black man. We were treated to a sumptuous meal. Lots of food. Good, feel-good food. Desserts, fruit, even cigarettes were given out. What a way to live. I can imagine how well they live in America if they live this well on a foreign land. “Of course, they do, they can, they are Americans” I rationalized. We then continued our journey to America.

*“Három Koma Kiment, a Liba Legelőre”  
Megláott egy repülőt fenn a levegőben  
Hej koma micsoda, eke taliga  
Hogy az Isten csodájába került az oda*

*Three simple guys were tending their geese*

*As they gazed up at the sky, finding there an airplane,  
Hey buddy, they yelled loudly, what on earth could that be?  
Is it a plow cart? How on earth does it fly?  
And how in Gods name did it get to be?*

Well, how on earth did I get myself into this situation? How did I get here? Where am I going? The heavens are all around us. The cities of England and Ireland bathed in lights almost in a blinding brilliance. No matter how much I enjoyed the view I could not shake the thoughts from my head:

*Mikor mentem Haza felé      As I was traveling toward home*

*Mikor mentem haza felé  
Megnyilt az ég három felé  
Ragyoktak rám a csillagok  
Mert tudták, hogy árva vagyok*

*As I was traveling toward home  
The skies opened up in splendor  
The stars shone upon me brightly  
They knew already then, an orphan I'll be*

*Édesanyám is volt nékem  
Keservesen nevelt engem  
Éjszaka font nappal mosott  
Jajj de keservesen tartott  
I had a mother, who struggled to raise me  
She did the laundry during the day  
And sat on the spinning wheel nightly  
Oh How difficult it was for her to take care of me*

... The stars were shining upon me, they knew that I was an orphan. The bright lights from the ground as well from the sky reminded me of a joke about this Russian super experimental agroscientist who cross-pollinated apples with cherries, cucumbers with melons, and live things with inanimate objects, but this was especially fitting. I wondered how many millions of bedbugs he had to interbreed with fireflies so that Moscow would be bathed similar brightness as London. As we traversed the Atlantic ocean we were urged to consume all the foodstuff we had with us, saying that the International rules will not allow any food to travel from East to West. What a rule I thought. Just like when the gypsy escaped punishment by outsmarting the Commies who forbade the studying of any western language like English, French, Italian and especially German. When they caught him studying German and were ready to punish him, he replied "But Comrades, I'm learning the East German language."

***WE FINALLY LANDED IN AMERICA***

We spent the night in America. We left in the evening and traveled all night and yet when we arrived, it was still night. We were not aware of the time zones and the time differences then. It took another 25 years before I learned where we landed. By that time I was managing a radio station, the "Station of the Nations", WHLD 1270 AM licensed to Niagara Falls. I also owned a small share in it. The Air Force, whose base was in Niagara Falls, offered tours to the community leaders to show them how they trained. They flew us way up north to Labrador, almost to the Arctic Circle. The 50-100 year old pine trees were no more than a dozen feet tall and their branches spread to no more than a couple of feet. Blueberries seemed to bear an abundant amount of fruit, but the bushes were less than a foot tall. It was fascinating to watch the military exercise under these harsh conditions. It was here, as the local base commander was explaining the base's history, "over there – those freshly painted barracks were last used in 1956, by the Hungarian Freedom Fighters. This is where they spent the night upon arrival from Europe – Munich, Germany in fact". "And where I did go from here?" I shouted. "Well, to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, another mothballed Army base. Or if your flight took the better part of a day, you went to California", he explained. I had a choice to make in Camp Kilmer - Whether I would like to be adopted by a couple or join the ranks of a boarding home. I chose the latter. Don't ask me why. I probably just figured I'd have less of a chance of being rejected by a new family if they numbered more than just the two. A bus took us toward a railroad station, driven by a black man. It didn't take long for an idiot to come up with some stupid comments: "Look, this guy isn't even good to be a gypsy, he's way too dark. Or maybe he spent extra time in the smokehouse or chimney. Maybe he is a chimney sweep." He rambled on and on in Hungarian belittling the drive and stopped only when the bus pulled off the road, its engine shut off, and the driver faced us. He proceeded to talk - "Oh my God," hushed the group "He spoke in Hungarian". He thanked the boor for his kind words, and continued saying that he himself is Hungarian. "I'm probably the only black Szekler or Székely. I consider myself a lucky Székely. Mom and Dad were refugees like you, from Transylvania and they adopted me when I was just a cute little baby. Look at me now" he said smiling. "This country accepted you, just as it did my parents. Some of you will spend the rest of your lives here. None of you know if and when you will have a chance to return home. I do hope you'll remember this." He suddenly started to snap his fingers together and we began to notice a rhythm, and his beautiful baritone voice began to sound the Székely Himnusz, the Szekler National Anthem.

*Ki tudja merre merre visz a végzet Who knows which way destiny will take you.*

*Bolyongós úton sötét éjjelen. Through meandering roads, dark nights.*

He continued with the national Anthem of Hungary. By this time, all of us joined him singing, sobbing, crying. When he started singing some exquisite folk songs, most of us were just listening. He explained that he learned these songs at a Hungarian Scout Camp where he received training as a scout leader. I decided

then to follow in his footsteps become a scout to learn these songs if I ever got the chance. We continued our ride towards the railroad station, but to this day I can't determine whether we went to Philadelphia or New York's Grand Central station. I suspect the latter, but who knows. Both stations were equidistant from Camp Kilmer and they were both used. With briefcase in one hand, clutching the train ticket in the other with "when the train stops five times get off" written on the back in Hungarian. The train station was streaming with activity, including carolers singing Christmas songs. It was two days before Christmas, well into the season. A single dollar bill was burning a hole in my pocket. The first one or I should say the one and only one I received at the camp. I had no idea of its value or buying power. The convenience store inside the station was loaded with goodies. A small bag of oranges was particularly tempting. It seemed to call me "come and get me, buy me". Needless to say I had a terrible time communicating my desire to purchase the orange to the shopkeeper since neither one of us spoke the other's language. Soon I took possession of the bag of oranges, a small bag, containing maybe a half dozen oranges and the shopkeeper started giving me change, pennies, nickels dimes, quarters, my God, how much is he giving me back? Which is worth more? The penny, which was bigger than the dime? The penny was copper, the dime looked like aluminum. My problem wasn't just the money. I wanted just one orange. Just one. No more. Maybe I raised the wrong finger to show him one. During the heated non verbal hassle I bit into an unpeeled orange, which tasted extremely bitter, not exactly what I expected. Even more so, I wanted to give the rest of the oranges back and maybe get some more shiny coins in exchange. I liked the pennies, just like a little kid. Finally the shopkeeper reached into his cash register, took the dollar out, and gave it back to me. I succeeded I thought, but my joy was short lived, he wouldn't take my change back, nor the oranges. We played something resembling shuffleboard as I finally ended up with my original dollar, the change, and orange that he peeled for me, plus the leftover oranges from the bag. The moment of truth arrived. I wanted just one orange. One. Period. I started giving the oranges to those around me. It must have been contagious; the shopkeeper kept opening bag after bag of oranges and gave it to any of us who wanted one. The carolers took interest in this weird activity and started singing to us. They were surprised that we cried when they were singing Silent Night and just looked at them when they sang Jingle Bells or Frosty the Snowman. We knew the melody of Silent Night and the words in Hungarian, but the others just didn't make any sense to us. I was busy thinking of Angels from Heaven, Mennybol az Angyal, which is my favorite Christmas song. We, as a family, even the grandchildren sing or just listen to it at Christmas time still today. Well, of course I ended up crying again at the railroad station.

## ***DERBY, NEW YORK***

Soon after we boarded the train, we pulled out from the station we started counting, one ... two ... three ... four ... five ... the fifth stop. The final

destination. I got off the train. It was December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 10 'clock at night. It was cold. Very, very cold. Especially without an overcoat. I have to go to the bathroom, but where do I go, who do I ask, and how? What if I'm in the bathroom and that's when they come for me? I didn't go. I couldn't. I was afraid. Every time a policeman, a conductor or a Salvation Army worker or anyone in a uniform approached me, I froze. I couldn't trust them. None of them noticed my soiled pants which were dark blue in color, but I had that warm feeling trickle down my legs. Okay, no other way to dance around it. I had to go. I did wet myself. It was dawn when I heard a loud voice asking "Is there anyone here waiting for me?" If it weren't for the extremely high ceiling at the station I would have knocked myself out, that's how high I jumped. Oops, that warm feeling surfaced yet again. "I ... I ... I am here. Over here" I yelled. This was my chance. I wasn't about to give it up. "Praise the Lord" I greeted the priest. "Praise the Lord Parson." I couldn't shake his hand, nor could I hug him. And in my joy, I forgot to ask him where the facilities were. I just kept saying what we were taught to say to the local priest. "Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord Parson."

"I'm not a parson, I'm not a vicar, I'm not a parish priest." He said as he took off, but he had no chance of losing me. I felt safe in his presence. Like a baby bird following the first thing he sees, I followed him for many, many years. He, Father Kóvári, a Piarist priest, had no association with any parishes, churches nor was he eligible for promotion within the church's hierarchy. He like the others in Derby, NY were simple friars taking the additional oaths not to seek earthly goods or wealth and to educate the youth. No wonder he was peeved when I called him a parson. I finally crashed in a bed. When I awoke, I found myself in a huge room with a bunch of empty bunk beds staring at me as if they were asking "who are you, what are you doing here? Why are you here now? Everyone else is home on vacation." I had no answer. It was Christmas Eve. The priests were readying themselves for the midnight mass, where you could hear Latin, English, Polish, and of course, Hungarian Christmas songs too. They were preparing to celebrate the infant Jesus' birth. Gifts were also exchanged, but the only thing I could give was thanks. Thank you very much as I received a gift also –galoshes, what a practical gift that turned out to be. I could never forget my first Christmas in America with those priests. Lest you forget, as my memories are rushing back, five decades later none of them are alive, but I will forever remember them all. There are those who joined the order later or emigrated at a later date. With them, I keep very close ties. How could I forget?! The singing of my favorite Christmas carol, Angels from Heaven, and all the other wonderful, sentimental Christmas songs, I began to feel at home. I was reborn as opposed to born again. That didn't mean I wasn't kissing a bunch of Jack Frost created flowers on the window pane, it didn't mean I didn't have nightmares or I wasn't homesick. But, the love, care, and understanding I received here helped me to suppress these feelings. It almost seemed as if as we celebrated Christ's birthday that we shared the same birthday – hogwash, mine is in April. I was born on April 16<sup>th</sup>, 1939 in Markotabödöge. These well-educated priests, and well-educated they were, none of them had ever heard of Markotabödöge, but "Welcome", "God

Bless”, they kept saying, one after another. I made a promise to myself, that I will do everything to earn their trust and respect. I will never embarrass them, nor, will I let them down. All these priests, single men, and each and every one of them, in their own way, were encouraging me, helping me to start a new life. *“Christ is born, Gloria. Christ is born Alleluia.”* Indeed I thought and I sang along with them.

The boarding home in Derby opened its doors in September of 1956 for those children who escaped with their parents, or were later born here after World War II. Here, meaning the United States, Canada, and a few from Cuba and South America. Most of the parents of these children were Piarist alumni in Hungary. The purpose was to provide an additional education to the regular American school requirements in Hungarian about Hungary’s history, language, and geography. It would take an unduly large amount of time to explain the trials and tribulation of criss-crossing the Western Hemisphere before the Piarists settled in Buffalo. It was a no-brainer to establish the “motherhouse” in the geocenter of the Northeast - NY, Toronto, Cleveland, Chicago, and Pittsburgh. They bought the Frank Lloyd Wright designed mansion Greycliff for a dollar from a wealthy banker. The extraordinary effort by all the priests very quickly showed great results. They dug the foundation for the addition of the new boarding home, poured the concrete, and helped the masons with the concrete block. Soon afterwards, the local Hungarians joined them in this new undertaking. The finishing touches, like installing doors, windows, and covering all the walls with knotty pine, Gábor Bodnár brought his finishing carpenters from Garfield, NJ. Mr. Bodnár, Gáborbá as he was endearingly was called by thousands, was one of the founders of the Hungarians Scouts in exile along with Fr. Gerencsér and Fr. Kővári. The boarding home finally opened in September, 1956. Full occupancy meant 25 students. The rest were put on a waiting list. All the children attended the local elementary school in North Evans and the high school students attended St. Francis in Athol Springs. The lingua Franca here was Hungarian. As soon as they left their respective schools. Hungarian had to be spoken in the car, on the beach, in the dining room, chapel, everywhere. Poor Jack Hanselman, the only German kid, had to learn Hungarian very quickly in order to survive the rigors of the boarding home. Suddenly everything changed in November of 1956. The boarding home discarded the waiting list and accepted 25 refugee children. The children of the ‘56 revolution. The solution was simple. To change the 25 beds to 25 bunk beds. These were the beds who were staring at me, wondering how I got here. How come I’m still here, since all the residents left for Christmas vacation. Of course, they didn’t know that I had no place else to go. Suddenly, this became my permanent residence. My new home. I guess we made peace during the next five years, since I had to wake up all the kids in the morning. And I said “good night, lights off” at night. A lovely lady was calling my name “Hegedüs ... Hegedüs ... are you awake? Are you up?” I quickly threw my clothes on and as I stepped out to the hall, a giant German Sheppard growled at me, while a small Puli was licking my hands and danced around me gleefully. I

was always terrified by any dog, especially the loud ones, no matter how small they were. This giant German shepherd ... yes I was frightened. But the kind lady chided the big one and shamed him into silence. The little one just needed one look to stop. "I am Lenkenéni (Auntie Lenke)" This German Shepard is "Silver" and the Puli is "Cigány". "Welcome my son. Welcome. I will try to stand in for your mom." Then she hugged me, but that had to be cut short because Silver got aggravated at this show of affection. "Come on my child, I made some lunch for you. I'm cooking not only for the dozen or so priests, but for all the students as well. Come, come follow me. I can hear your stomach growl. You must be hungry." After lunch she led me into the chapel and encouraged me to give thanks to God for his guidance. "You will like it here. You will be safe here. You'll never be lonely again. You will have the priests, who will befriend you. I am always here and I will always help you." This was the beginning of a friendship that lasted over thirty years. During the 70's and 80's I visited her with Maria many times during each of those thirty years, later having the children with us and the love between her and our children was precious. Every Mother's day, even though she never married, we gave her flowers. She was my mom in exile. She quickly told me about the priest, who belonged to the Piarist order, a teaching order, similar to the Jesuits. They do go out to local churches daily to say one or two masses to earn extra money, but teaching is their primary occupation. Some of their most famous, or infamous, students were Edward Teller, Leo Szilárd the creators of the atomic bomb, von Kármán – the jet and the impressive list goes on.

Then Christmas Eve arrived. I'd never seen so many priests together in one room. Remember, I came from a one-horse town. There were a dozen priests saying mass. Then the singing of Christmas songs in English, Hungarian, Latin, and Polish. Yes, there were a few Polish Piarists as well. They encouraged me to participate, but those of you who know me know how well I can sing and are smiling now. The Christmas vacation came and went without much happening. I kept busy reading, and joined Father Kővári in the woodworking shop. Interestingly enough, we were both products of woodworking or construction technology school in Hungary. When the regular students returned, it took a while to get to know each other, but we were busy studying. They, their Hungarian, and us learning English. Let me tell you, it was not easy. Writing down two dozen words ten times and read them as I was writing, and eventually just fell asleep with the dictionary in hand. It became evident rather quickly that I couldn't graduate in '57 even though my grades in math, chemistry and physics were 100 plus bonuses, so I decided to spend an extra year in high school. Well I had no alternative anyway. This created an opportunity for me to help the original 25 students with their Hungarian language, literature, geography, and History. I also had a chance to help my classmates with math and sciences. The routine of reveille, chapel, breakfast, school, study hall, and evening activities, lights out was well-established. The weekends were another story. We spent most of our times with Scout activities. Troop 214, which is still active in Buffalo was modeled after or was the American equivalent of 2BKG, Hungary's first scout troop, which was established by Sándor Sik, Sch. P. the head of the Piarists in Hungary. So, it

should be no surprise to anyone that scouting was on the same level of importance as Hungarian history and geography. Our scout master, Fr. Kővári had an almost legendary reputation for strictness. He didn't seem to have much kindness in him until you got to know him. His demands in practicing tent setups, marching practices, earning merit badges, living within the scout laws did pay off. Every time we performed or marched in parades (St. Patrick's Day, Loyalty Day, etc.), we sang the beautiful folk songs that I envied when our black Székely bus driver's had sung them. We always performed for the October 23<sup>rd</sup> commemoration of the 1956 revolution. We were down right impressive in the St. Patrick's day parades in Buffalo. Just imagine for a moment fifty kids in shorts and short sleeve shirts marching with the precision of a 17-jewel Swiss watch. Oh how cold we were before and after, but our pride in our achievement kept us warm as we marched in quick time in front of the podium where the dignitaries and judges stood and applauded us. I wouldn't say that my half dozen or so years were uneventful, even before I graduated from high school; I was already assisting Fr. Kővári in all aspects of the boarding homes' life. To supervise and teach the children of General Pál Maléter., the grandson of Nobel Laureate Szentgyörgyi, the grandson of the former Premier of Hungary, Gömbös, and other important children of renowned heritage was not as easy task. Some of us, including myself, were simple folk, refugees. The big difference was that everyone other than me was able to go home to someone at vacation time – a relative or loved one, but I had no one. Even the other kids who escaped in '56 had come with their families. I was paid \$40 a month for my efforts, but as I started my two year construction technology education at what is now E.C.C., I spent \$60 a month on the greyhound bus and city bus to go to school. I did odd jobs here and there. I spent an entire summer with Mr. Bodnár in NJ as a carpenter's apprentice and the following summer I built a house for the cook and caretaker. I still have my hammer, my measuring tape and saw that the priests gave me and they also paid \$1 for every hour I worked. Trust me, I worked long hours. So I managed to live, study, read, and work. I spent many nights dreaming. Most of them were nightmares. Since my return to Hungary 34 years after 1956, I have no more nightmares. I not only had a roof over my head, and was well-fed, but forged a friendship with the priests. I invited them all to our wedding and they all honored us with their presence. No wonder that our marriage is rock solid even after 40 years. I controlled my homesickness by not even allowing any thoughts to creep in while I was alone. I wrote in innumerable letters to home at first, but the responses became more and more censored, some looking like Swiss cheese, so full of holes. Eventually, I didn't even get the responses. And so there was no point in writing any more. The reason had to be my refusal to join the Hungarian governments spy system. In fact I reported the individual to the FBI, who solicited my services, but then he mysteriously died a few months later. There was no chance of going home. I'm done. My goose was cooked. A couple more things I'd like to say here. I was Hegedüs László Jenő and my papers that brought me here listed me as Jenő László Hegedüs. The priest called me Jenő, since there were 8 or 9 other Lászlós in the boarding home. When Fr. Kővári called for Laci (short for László), either nobody or

everybody moved. He could get so very angry if the right one didn't show, so I became Jenő (Eugene). My mother used to write "my son, Laci, that you pastors call Jenő, how is he? God bless every one of you for helping him. I go to church every Sunday and pray with our "peace priest" (a communist sympathizer, not really a priest) for all of you and for my son. How can I ever repay you? Can you tell me how much I owe you?" Little did she know that the Hungarian money here would have had basically no value to repay her debt. This put a smile on the priest's faces. "She must have loved you very much. Well, we don't hate you either." They kidded me often. It will be 50 years since I left. I have built a rather sizable circle of friends, my wife of forty years, Maria Jóna, who left Hungary at the age of 3 and yet she still speaks fluently in Hungarian. Every 4<sup>th</sup> of July there are three generations of us gathering at a friend's house whom God blessed with both of his hands. The grandchildren alone are enough to fill the pool that he so generously shares with us. Our grandchildren are friends with each other which obviously makes our children friends with our friend's children. We all feel that this is our extended family. We feel like we are kin. We have not inherited this kinship, we chose it. We miss the old timers, the wise. We have no one to ask for advice or information about facts. We became the old timers. Most of us are retired, senior citizens, goldenagers, whatever the moniker. Needless to say, our grandchildren love us, and if they only knew how much we love them, they could easily twist us around their little fingers. Sure, we are ready to spoil them, much to the chagrin of our children. Most of our children didn't have the luxury of having two sets of grandparents, some had none, so we try to make up for it. We are telling stories about our beautiful homeland, Hungary. Hungary's people, history, heritage, it's only the nice thing we talk about. They are too innocent yet. They love us even with a bald head, false teeth and our blazing speed with a cane. I love them even more when they childishly correct our accents. To them I don't complain. They don't need to know how destiny short-changed us. They cruelty of not being able to visit my parents for over 3 decades, the nightmares, the lack of friends in the first few years, the struggles in school, but they don't have to know.

Eugene László Hegedüs was a 17 year old high school student in a construction technology high school in Győr, Hungary when he had to escape in November of 1956 to the United States of America. He arrived to the Buffalo area, spending the next 6 years at the boarding home run by the Piarist fathers at Greycliff. He became a scout and a scout master. After fulfilling his military and university obligations, he spent 20 years as a mathematics teacher and eventually the Assistant Headmaster at the Calasanctius School for the Gifted and Talented. Then for another 20 years, he worked as the manager of a multi-cultural, ethnic radio station in Niagara Falls. He fills his retirement years with creative endeavors: writing several volumes of poetry-all related to the 1956 revolution and to his trials and tribulations, and carving a zoo full of buffaloes [www.buffaloodzoo.com](http://www.buffaloodzoo.com) and other animals from driftwood After over 46years of marriage, he is now busy with the five grandchildren that God blessed him with. On the other hand he is busy recruiting students for the MICE foundation where he is the program coordinator for the Entrepreneurship Training Program for high school juniors and seniors in Partnership with UB's School of Management [www.mice-us-foundation.com](http://www.mice-us-foundation.com)

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