

Remembering 1956: Invited Immigrants — The Sopron Saga

Márta Mihály

I am telling my story. I do not intend to speak for anybody else in my group, which numbered 289, the Sopron Foresters, with whom I landed on Canada's shores early in 1957. Memories fade and the narrative may change. There is one thing though I know for absolute certain: I never intended to leave my homeland. Yet I had to, under duress, first as a child from Székelyföld in Transylvania, soon after World War II, and again in 1957. I know also that the saddest day of my youth is the 4th November 1956, the day when the Hungarian revolution collapsed. Times, places and political regimes changed, but in my heart and in my tradition I remained a proud, Székely Hungarian, free and privileged as a Canadian citizen.

My father was a forester and in 1956 I was studying to be one, in the last year (5th year) of my studies in Sopron, just months before my diploma dissertation was due in forest engineering. The thought of freedom inspired me, which also sustained our Revolution. I was sure of our Revolution's glorious victory. I believed in the rebirth of a free and independent Hungary. I know too that the hopes of the Hungarian nation were similar to mine. But ours was the dream in 1956. Cast out from my country by force and landing on the Canadian shores were the reality.

In this paper I would like to tell my version of the Sopron foresters' saga as I remember it after 50 years. Most of it is engraved into my heart's emotions forever, even if the memory of the mind may fade. The Revolution and what followed for 50 years is a unique historical chapter in the annals of Hungarian immigration to Canada.

On the 4th of November, 1956, I walked across the border from Sopron into Austria. I was one of more than 500 from the same institution among over 80 of my classmates in the 5th year of Forest Engineering. The 500 were a mixed lot: students from three faculties (forest, mining, and civil engineering), a good number of professors, and family members. The Soviet tanks bearing down on us, the border unguarded from the Sopron side, the Austrians did not stop us.

A good number from the Sopron group was brought together by the Austrians and stayed together first near the border in Judenau in the hopes that

soon we shall go home. As the days passed, our hopes slowly began to fade. Soon, Dr. Drimmel, the Austrian minister of education, appeared with arrangements for us to move to a grandiose mansion at Ferienhort on the shore of picturesque St. Wolfgang Lake (the place is known from the *Sound of Music* film). Dr. Drimmel thought this was a good transitional environment for us wanting to study German and to rehash materials we covered in class before we returned home. As the weeks went by the political situation in Hungary worsened. Returning was a big risk that many tried with various successes. Slowly the news of our existence at Ferienhort become known practically all over the globe. Immigration agents from different countries started to appear. We were an ideal target, we were young and educated.

It was at that time, to be specific, the 4th of December 1956, that J.W. Pickersgill, Canada's minister of immigration, and a certain "Mr. Cox," a government representative, appeared. They brought a credible invitation. According to this, we were to be guaranteed by the Canadian government to continue our studies in Canada in Hungarian with our professors, during the period from 1957-1961, until all members of the group graduated. We would be the Sopron Division of the Faculty of Forestry at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. After graduation we were to receive an appropriate university diploma, so it would be acceptable, if we returned to Hungary. This last point was very important to me, still hoping for a return to my homeland. The invitation was many ways good news, but it provoked arguments for and against the move. Many opposed it, mainly my classmates in the 5th year; others thought that Europe would be better. Finally by ballot the Canadian offer won! I supported it.

All in all 30 of the 5th year students accepted Canada, some stayed on in Europe, and a good number returned home. A copy of our contract with Canada was sent back to the University in Sopron and an authenticated copy was placed for safekeeping in the Vienna Archives.

The Canadian government's invitation may have been a unique event in the history of their immigration, but it was a very definite stand also against the Soviets. This made us a global sensation. All the leading papers and journals sought the story, their way, hoping to create controversy and sensation. We were pestered by journalists and had to resist. The excitement did not fade until months later, it continued on well after we settled down in British Columbia.

Our decision was lauded by contemporary poets and writers. J. A. Michener, the well-known American writer, travelled to the Austrian border to witness the struggle of the freedom seekers, he felt sorry that the Sopron group did not go to America. "What a vital impulse Vancouver is going to get" he wrote in his book *The Bridge at Andau* in 1957.

After enjoying for almost two months the Austrians' gracious hospitality, on the 29th of December our Canadian journey began. 289 of us

left Salzburg and travelled across Europe by train to Liverpool, England. In the harbour the luxury liner *Empress of Britain* awaited us. It was New Years Eve and well-dressed citizens were everywhere on the way to parties. Liverpool was in very festive mood. Close to midnight I located my four-person cabin and settled in. Since I had very little to put away, the settling in was quickly done.

Mid afternoon on January 1st, 1957, we left Europe. I remember the small farewell celebration on the deck. These were highly emotional hours for me; I still find it painful to think of it.

We arrived in St. John, in New Brunswick on the 8th of January 1957. Most of us were seasick. It felt good to be on land. We received a welcoming cable from ministers Pickersgill and Sinclair. We were given \$8 per person and some toiletry. The city welcomed us and I felt very grateful. Exactly 10 years before there was another arrival for my family, as Székely refugees from Romania to communist Hungary. The Hungarian authorities did not want us in.

We boarded the train on the 19th of January in St. John on the east coast and began the journey west. We stopped for a warm welcome in Montreal, than in Ottawa where Pickersgill was waiting for us at the train station. He called our train, the "the freedom train". We crossed the snow-covered country with stops and other welcomes in Winnipeg, Saskatoon, and Edmonton and at our first destination, Abbotsford near Vancouver, in British Columbia. People, young and old of all nationalities came to the stations to greet us. The Salvation Army and the Red Cross were waiting for us at all stations. All with welcoming presents and smiles. I felt humbled and very grateful for the generosity.

After a month stay in Abbotsford we moved on, arrived on the 20 of February to Powell River where we spent six months. We were given housing by the local paper and pulp mill. Well kept and well fed, we had time to rest and start in earnest to learn English. Our cost was covered by the \$65 per month, the amount each person received from the Department of Immigration. This help lasted until the end of the year.

The community of Powell River was a small factory town located on one of the fiords of the British Columbia coastline, not very far from Vancouver. It was there that we had the first opportunity to see the famous coastal rainforest. What a magical experience it was. Very different from anything I saw before. The trees were very tall, as if reaching to the sky, covered with bryophytes attached to bark and branches, like a bridal veil, standing in the misty sunshine. The ground covered with heavy undergrowth of ferns and other luscious green plants and giant decaying tree trunks lying in a chance created pattern, made the forest appear impenetrable. This was virgin forest, a mysterious and secretive place. I knew it right away: the massive complexity

of this forest and enormous biomass, a true *dauerwald*, defies my understanding of silvics and silviculture.

We spent 6-8 hours a day learning English. It was very concentrated and most effective. We had the highly qualified personnel of the provincial department of education, who did not speak Hungarian at all.

Spring arrived, and it was time to look for summer jobs. Very few of us found any, the ones who did, were very lowly jobs, with a minimum pay. We were very disappointed and convinced that all the low-paying jobs were reserved for the Sopron group in B.C. But we did not know the ways of the Canadian students. They were in fact happy to get any kind of job for the summer, even with low pay. They were able to save up their tuition fees and more, for expenses, during the usual four months summer break. This was contrary to our experience at home, with much shorter summer breaks, including four weeks compulsory forestry training and another four in military camps. The State placed us into positions, set our wages, and gave directions as the bureaucrats saw it. This arrangement of total control robbed us from any experience useful in search for work in Canada. We did not know how to bargain and how to say no. Then another thing, we had absolutely no experience in the inner workings of the immigration system. This system automatically delegates everybody, who does not speak English or French sufficiently well to the same level, regardless of education or know-how. This is fine to a point, but there is more to the system I did not know, until I met professionals who came to Canada before me, which I considered then and consider now immorally predatory. People with high-level training are enticed to come, but then when they arrive the same system that brought them here prevents them practicing their profession in the most ridiculous ways of exclusion. So, when I started to search to pinpoint the roots of our problems in the early years, I started to think of Canada as the country of Ph.D. dishwashers and MD hospital orderlies. And I realized how much a mistake it is to encourage the brain-drain from other, much worse off societies outside, and wasting talent not utilized, once inside.

At the beginning of September we all moved to Vancouver, rented student accommodations near the university, and began classes in Forestry. Our professors spent the summer to prepare for the new curriculum, adapted to Canadian principles. It was a tremendous undertaking, requiring dedication to the profession and first of all to the students.

In spite of the lack of summer jobs, 210 of my fellow students enrolled in Forestry at the University of British Columbia. We all paid our tuition fee, exactly the same amount as any Canadian student, who took similar courses, and were given the same responsibilities and the same privileges. Nothing more and nothing less! Most of us had no money to pay the tuition fee, but we could apply and get a bank loan. I paid my loan back to the Bank of Montreal in two or three years. I remember once László, my

classmate and husband, and we ran out of money, and the electricity bill was due. László went to the manager in the Bank of Montreal for a \$10 loan. He gave him ten dollars.

In April, 1958 I graduated. I received my university diploma for studies that began almost six years before. I felt sad that my parents were not with me. But it was my investment and my own treasure. I was proud and happy. It was a very high achievement in Canada for a female in 1958. There were no female forestry students at U.B.C. or female graduates at that time. I was among the first female to graduate from the Sopron division in Vancouver. Nobody informed us of the non-existence of female foresters, before we came to Canada. It was a very sad discovery. Out of our 30 classmates, 27 graduated.

Life was a series of ups and downs for me and for all female graduates in those days in Canada. I could not get a professional position. So history was repeated: one more B.S.F. working in the lowest echelons on the job scale. It was a difficult beginning. Many of my classmates decided to continue studies for higher degrees out of dedication to the profession or perhaps due to the lack of proper professional opportunities. The others did all kinds of work, but we survived, until a better position came along. It was not easy, but we were young, totally free, and equal to all, full of hope for a better future.

The Sopron Division closed its doors in the spring of 1961. The total graduates numbered 140. From the 5th year 27 students graduated, the 4th 37, the 3rd 33, the 2nd 20 and from the 1st 23. 57 colleagues received their diplomas at other universities, 13 left for private business. Our professors had to start from the beginning after 1961. Most of the older ones retired, others had difficulty in finding reasonable positions.

I base some of my numbers on the reports of László Adamovich and Oszkár Sziklai,¹ my former professors, and Kálmán Roller,² the one-time dean of the Sopron Division. Their data are from 15 and 25 years after the Sopron Division closed its doors and about as far back from the time when I am writing this essay. The results I see are most impressive. I feel very proud, because what the Sopron foresters achieved is not from inherited wealth. It is coming from search for knowledge, from consistent hard work and perseverance against all odds. The achievements are the fruits of well-used time, well invested energy, and unwavering commitment. The higher the achievement the costlier it gets.

What kind of achievements do I talk about? Usually 10% of a typical Canadian class go for a graduate degree. In the Sopron Division 25% of the graduates got a master degree and 11% earned Ph.D. About 25% received different kinds of financial help for their studies. My own class procured many higher degrees: 10 M.Sc. and 6 Ph.D. degrees, in total 60% of 27.

But, in spite of the high academic achievement, the Sopron foresters had some unique difficulties on the outset of their forestry practice. They came from the European forestry tradition as practiced in a small country. They saw their role as protectors of the environment and frugal users of the forest resources. They knew a sustained yield silviculture that is intensive and continuity oriented. They were raised on the idea that the forest was there to nourish and protect in a conservationists sense, and take its products with a view to the consequences for the total environment. This view was not shared in the 1950s by the Canadian forest industry. They still operated on the basis of the 19th century doctrine, plainly speaking, they "mined" the forest as it were an inexhaustible supply of wood. The aim was to harvest as much timber as possible out of a forest and damn the consequences. This kind of logging operations was a total shock to me: high-grading with heavy machinery, leaving behind a devastated landscape. I could not understand the practice and all the waste of biomass disgusted me. They were not even willing to discuss what they were doing without painfully trying to point out our "naïveté" or outright lack of touch with reality. Thomas Berry (1990) explains better than we could at that time the dreadful reality which is now clearly manifested, after many years of abusive management:

In this disintegrating phase of our industrial society, we now see ourselves not as the splendour of creation, but as the most pernicious mode of earthly being. We are the termination, not the fulfilment of the earth process. If there were a parliament of creatures, its first decision might well be to vote the humans out of the community, too deadly a presence to tolerate any further. We are the affliction of the world, its demonic presence. We are the violation of earth's most sacred aspects.³

How right he is! Thomas Berry is the most provocative eco-theologian of our time. He dedicates his book, *The Dream of the Earth*, to nothing less of creation than "the Great Red Oak" beneath whose sheltering branches the book was written.

On balance, I feel the Sopron foresters passed through those early formative years with flying colours. I dare to say, that they were effecting changes in the system. Whatever the reasons, but I suspect their presence as leading administrators, research scientists and educators had much to do with it. Now we see a much more regulated reforestation practice, less destructive, supervised logging, and better waste management. Their influence also awoke the need for a better and healthier forest as an environmental protection.

The Sopron foresters' influence is easier to infer from the actual facts of their careers. Many of them are now retired from high position in government services, business, and academia. The Sopron foresters pointed the way to make the profession see lasting benefit in a colossal change:

opening up the forestry schools and professional practice to women. Browsing through the Forestry Faculty's and student lists at U.B.C., I am happy to see the change. Female forestry professionals are now in responsible positions in every field of this lovely profession. I like to think that we were pioneers and had shone light on possibilities.

We have well-known university professors among us. Several thousand of well regarded scientific articles, essays, and monographs that have appeared in recent decades were written by Sopron foresters. These are accessible in libraries and on the internet. I mention one example, my husband, László, whose work I know best, having been his research associate in many projects. His very early book of 1978 *Multivariate analysis in vegetation research*⁴ and his rise to full professorship after seven years out of graduate school is not a unique case among the Sopron foresters who, quickly moved to the fore front of their fields. My classmate, Dr. L. Pászner, university professor (U.B.C.), now retired, left his mark on forestry wood science as an inventor with patents on cement bonding of wood, wood hydrolysis to sugars and novel pulping methods of wood. Many of my colleagues received highly meritorious awards and through recognition by peers moved up into the highest echelons of their profession.

The political situation in Hungary drastically changed after the Soviets left. People of the country began waking up to freedom, slowly coming into their life. The foresters at home were free to reach out. Many joint projects were proposed and consummated. Again I use László's case for an example, which I know best. In recognition of his contribution to theory and applications in his field, statistical ecology, he was elected into the ranks of academicians in the Hungarian Academy of Science in Budapest. Going to the induction ceremonies, Dr. Bálint Zólyomi of the Academy met us at main entrance. By a friendly hug, he said: Welcome home László, son of our native land. Dr. Gábor Fekete introduced László to the members of the Academy and to the invited guests. It was an emotional gathering and a supreme testimony to the times: the contributions to science by a Sopron forester, exiled by the communist regime and recognized at home. What an honour it was! I also spoke at the inaugural, as wife and research partner, not realizing that I am breaking an almost two century's tradition of the Academy. A few years later our adopted land's highest scientific institution, the Canadian Academies of Science (a division in the Royal Society of Canada) elected László to its community of fellows. It was immense honour and also memorable occasion for a Sopron forester to take chair among Canada's scientific elite, under pomp and ceremony at the Parliament in Ottawa.

We are students no longer, just retired foresters, but there is a fitting memento, to remember the time, long-long time ago, at the adopted university of U.B.C. It is an open gate carved of yellow-cedar, a native tree in the mountains overlooking Vancouver, in the Székely tradition. This magnificent

work of art is the creation of emeritus research scientist, a Sopron forester, László Józsa. It stands by the Forestry building of U.B.C., overlooking the memorial park honouring the life and work of another Sopron forester, a classmate, Gyula Juhász. Inscribed on the open gate, in three languages is: "Our future is rooted in our traditions". The open gate invites all to look back into their tradition and draw strength from it. This gate is a thank you gift to the people of Vancouver and to all Canadians for their generosity in time of our need, in behalf of a 140 Sopron graduates.

Another instrument well fitting to characterize the strength of Sopron tradition is a periodical that links the members of the group through a life time and promotes camaraderie, is the *Kapocs* newsletter. We are now spread over the globe, but we are connected by *Kapocs*, thanks to the hard work and good offices of its editor, László Rétfalvi, and his editorial board.

I quote the text of Pickersgill's final address to the Sopron foresters:

Most of the countries of refuge wanted to receive Hungarians who could start to work immediately, but we in Canada alone encouraged students to come here to complete their studies. We believed, in the long run, their additional qualifications would increase their contribution to their new homeland. I believed that the Sopron faculty by staying together to complete their studies could make an even greater contribution to the development of our forest industry and our national life. In the quarter century since 1957, Dean Roller and the professors and students from Sopron have exceeded my highest hopes. In every province and region of Canada graduates of the Sopron faculty are numbered among the leading citizens. The freedom fighters from Hungary... was as fine a group of immigrants as our country ever received. Among the very best were the foresters from Sopron.⁵

There is no need for further comments by me.

NOTES

¹ Laszlo Adamovich and Oszkar Sziklai, *Foresters in Exile: The Sopron Forestry School in Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1970).

² Kalman J. Roller, "Hungarian Foresters in Canada," in *Sopron Chronicle, 1919-1986*, edited by the Sopron Alumni, U.B.C. (Toronto: Rákóczi Foundation, 1986), 1-177; see also the same author's *Mi is voltunk egyszer az Akadémián: Soprontól - Vancouverig* (Toronto: Pythagoras, 1996).

³ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco, Ca.: Sierra Club Books, 1990)

⁴ László Orloci, *Multivariate analysis in vegetation research* (The Hague: W. Junky Publishers, 1978).

⁵ See Pickersgill's foreword to the *Sopron Chronicle, 1919-1986*. For more of his writings on the subject see "The Minister and Hungarian Refugees," in *Breaking Ground: The 1956 Hungarian Refugee Movement to Canada*, ed. Robert H. Keyserlingk (Toronto: York Lane Press, 1993), 47-51.