

Helen M. Szablya

One Family's Escape to Freedom

A burst of gunfire shook the windows. It was midnight in Hungary, December, 1956. "Good God, curfew time lasts till seven in the morning. What am I going to do?"

I shook my husband, John. Startled from his dream, he reached for the phone. We were lucky. It still worked. The doctor's advice was to try to wait. In case of emergency he would give us directions over the phone. The ambulance refused to come since it was a perfect target for the Soviets stationed right across from us, on the hillside – no cover whatsoever.

We held each other very close. The warmth of my husband comforted me as, with the passing of time, the cramps started coming.

The two children slept quietly in their cribs, not even occasional machine-gun bursts startled them. They were used to it by now. It was ten days after the Revolution was crushed; the fighting still was going on.

I could vividly remember now the morning when I was awakened by cannon fire after our four wonderful days of freedom.

"No, it can't be. Hungary has a constitutional government, which declared the country neutral. We are out of the Warsaw Pact, and the Soviets must leave the country according to the U.N. decision," my husband tried to comfort me. But he, too, knew it was cannon fire. He turned on the radio and we heard the message of the government: "The Soviet troops are coming back into the country. Our prime minister asked for help from the U.N. and we are fighting." The Writers' Association asked for the help of all people in the world. The message came in German, French, English, Russian and Hungarian. This went on for 90 minutes – and after that – everything was lost.

Now, ten days later, I was going to have my baby. I clung to my husband as the pains drew closer. Finally the first rays of the sun colored the sky pink, and the light gave me new hope as I tried to fight back the arrival of the baby.

At 7 a.m. we started running toward the hospital. Five long blocks of pain, cramps, blood and water, a few staring faces, distant machine-gun fire and more cramps melting into one incessant feeling of rupture.

When I arrived at the hospital, the only midwife there, who had worked alone for 48 hours, had no relief in sight. My doctor was not there yet. Several workmen were repairing the windows of the delivery room, which were shot out during the night. Two women were giving birth.

Then cramps and cramps again, unstoppable, merciless cramps till the beautiful, happy cry of my son brought the long awaited relief from the suffering and fear. I saw my doctor lift him and put him on my stomach. He felt so soft, so sweet. And even the windows were repaired.

Remembering it all

Another ten days passed, and by that time we were determined to leave our homeland. Even though my husband was one of the promising young scientists who had every allowable privilege under the Soviet system, it seemed to us that if we wanted to bring up our children according to our beliefs, we had to leave.

All our belongings we hoped to take with us were packed into a small suitcase. Forty of us scrambled into a pickup truck in the freezing rain, and under a canvas held up by a broom.

As we left Budapest, we remembered the many beautiful concerts, operas, balls of former years, the 50-day siege during World War II, the hopes for freedom while trying to rebuild the country, then, the 1948 take-over by the communists with but 17 percent of the popular vote. The desperation, trials and tribulations every individual, every family had to go through. Our glorious Revolution with its four days of freedom – and the 20,000 fresh graves in the city.

The truck was already on the highway making good time, when all of a sudden we stopped with a jerk. An officer waved his arms in the middle of the road.

The driver handed him his documents. He was supposed to go to the border with some help to pick up a truck left there by refugees.

“With some help? Do you call 40 people ‘some help’?” he yelled at our driver. “See that you get back home!”

We turned around and I understood why he had no time to read papers, to check on people. There were so many would-be refugees that he simply sent them home.

On another route we ran at night, our truck came to a halt in front of a Soviet tank.

A Mongolian colonel approached; we were caught. He radioed for the Hungarian police, who arrived in a short time.

The police station was crowded with refugees.

“Everybody with children, here, into this room! The only one we can heat.”

We were shoved into a dark place, lit by a sole lightbulb in one corner of the room. While we settled down, the muffled storytelling went on and on:

“I swam across an icy river three times before I got caught, thinking every time that Austria was just on the other side...”

“We were sinking in the swamp, holding our children above our heads with our last strength...”

“My child is over there... he ran across to Austria when we were captured. We were already so near... so near...”

The usual sentence for illegal border crossing was two to three years of hard labor.

But in the morning they put us all on a bus and sent us to Budapest.

When the bus broke down, our police escort said, “You know your duties. I will be back in an hour and a half... of course, nobody can hold me responsible for whatever you do while I am away.”

We did not feel strong enough to walk to the border 20 miles away, with three small children, Louis being only ten days old. We started home. The train reached Győr by curfew and did not go farther. Everybody had to find a place in a hurry.

We saw a Red Cross building across the depot and ran. We found ourselves in the company of 600 people. There were beds, food and even medicine. We felt grateful and happy as we talked to the Red Cross lady, who, in an unguarded moment whispered in my ear:

“We are occupied by the police. We may give you whatever you need, but you cannot move out of this building. You are under arrest.”

The bus on which we were transported to Budapest the next day was supposed to go to another Red Cross building there, but they took us instead to police headquarters.

“Men should go inside the building, women and children can go home!” came the order. We dared not move. We heard of men being captured and taken to Siberia for no reason at all. All the women stayed and waited.

I pretended that I had to go to the bathroom. The stern guard still would not let me go inside, so I ran to an apartment building. I begged to make a phone call, and contacted the chairman of the Revolutionary Committee at the university who understood instantly what happened and what could be done.

"I am right now negotiating with the Justice Department about kidnappings which are taking place in the streets. Why, this is just such a case. From a Red Cross building... to police headquarters..."

Ten minutes later, his imposing figure pushed the machine gun-bearing guards aside and he stepped into police headquarters. Through the glass door we could hear voices: "Yes, it was the Red Cross building..." "They have taken us..." "Kidnapped is the word."

Once more we felt the beauty of even limited freedom. We were allowed to walk home with our baggage, to come out from behind the bars... We were happy, yet depressed, as we felt that there was absolutely no way out of Hungary.

A passage to freedom

"Translate these papers into Russian for me, please!" my husband waved some documents at me while I was deep in thought about how in the world we could reach the border town of Sopron.

My sister had escaped to Vienna. She sent us word that we, too, could reach freedom, if we could get to friends in Sopron.

I was not much interested in my husband's papers until I saw what they were. In less than an hour we had our counterfeit documents that would, hopefully, get us out of Hungary. My husband, as deputy chairman of the department at the university assigned himself to go to Sopron to resume teaching because their professor had escaped.

As the early darkness of the winter afternoon crept into our train compartment the next day, we noticed that the lights did not go on in our coach. We considered moving to another part of the train but decided to stay because the children were snoozing comfortably.

At the next station we felt "Providence" at work. The train stopped and Russian soldiers made everybody get off who did not have the No. 2 border-zone permit stamped into his passport. But when our door opened, it was a Hungarian soldier who appeared behind the flashlight. The Russians, it was said, were afraid of being murdered in the dark compartments.

"Where are you going?" he asked us.

"To Sopron."

He did not know what he should think of us. If we were high officials, he'd better not argue with us, but if not... well, our papers looked official enough, he always had his excuse, and... a twinkle in his eye showed that he was thinking of the other possibility also. He really did not seem to mind if we wanted to escape...

"Thank you, professor, what a nice baby." He slammed the door shut.

A near-fatal mishap

In Sopron came two days of silent waiting until our friends arranged for reliable guides. The children had to hold their cries, even their breaths, in order not to betray us. The house we stayed in was a house for retired people, and any noise from a child would have been suspicious.

Finally, an old guide led us out into the hills to reach the Austrian border on foot. When he stopped to wave his cane we also stopped! It meant danger. When he wiped the sweat off his bald head, it meant that we could go on. Behind him went our daughter, Helen, with a young couple. We were next with the two boys, the baby in the basket, and our two-year-old walking and looking for mushrooms, as we all pretended to be out only for a walk. After a while his small legs could not carry him any longer. He crawled into his Father's knapsack and fell asleep.

The stars shone quietly over us after a two-day rain. There was no moon in the sky. A perfect night to escape.

We were on the last leg of our journey. I slipped and started sliding slowly down the hillside, at least this is what it felt like. I wanted to stop, but I could not. Then a small tug on my coat caught me. I stood up and smoothed my coat. There was a small hole. I looked back, and a barbed-wire fence stopped me from falling into a ravine-like terrace with stalks on the bottom of it, put there to hold up the vines.

If it had not caught me I would be dead. But there was no time to stop and reflect. In 45 minutes we would have to run two-and-a-half miles on the muddy lakeshore, after all that rain, to make it across the border.

The baby was whimpering, despite the sleeping pills we had given him. Janos slept in his Father's knapsack; he too was drugged.

Only Helen, our 4-year-old, walked on her own little feet, looking straight ahead, then at us, with her huge, terrified, blue eyes.

She knew something was happening but could not comprehend it. She was trying to be good.

"Do you see those pear trees?" our guide pointed to some trees not too far way. "Three hundred feet beyond those is the Austrian border!"

How I wished he had not said it! Again, like the first time, when we were stopped by the Soviet tank, we had seen the lights of Austria. What if they would capture us again! I could no longer think. My mind, my legs, my whole body grew numb from fear, from desperation. But I heard a firm voice within:

"This time you are going to make it!"

I ran as fast as I could and pulled myself up from the ground for the fifth time, when all of a sudden I felt the softness of the "no-man's-land" under my feet.

Then a small flag touched my hand.

As I looked, my husband's radiant face and outstretched arms were greeting me. I fell into his embrace and started crying. We were in Austria.

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Helen M. Szablya

Honorary Consul of Hungary for Washington, Oregon, and Idaho, Helen M. Szablya is an award-winning author, columnist, translator, and lecturer. Based in Seattle, she has two university degrees, speaks six languages, and many of her more than 700 publications have won awards. Szablya co-authored "Hungary Remembered," an award-winning oral history drama/lecture series for the 30th anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution. "The Fall of the Red Star," her award-winning book about an illegal Boy Scout troop during the 1956 uprising, was published for the 40th anniversary. Szablya recently received the Order of Merit of the Republic of Hungary for her consular and cultural work. She and her husband escaped in 1956 with two toddlers and a newborn. They have seven children and 16 grandchildren.

Please also read the story of Helen A. Szablya, the daughter of Helen M. Szablya.