Remembering Hungary

Thomas Blatt

The Hungarian Revolt of the fall of 1956 shocked the world by the force and brutality of the Soviet Union against an indigenous and apparently socialist uprising. Estimates are that 200,000 left Hungary.[1] Arthur Koestler notes, “I do not think there has been a migration of scholars and artists on a similar scale since the fall of Byzantium.”[2]

In January of 1957, three months after the Hungarian Revolt, President Eisenhower asked the 85th Congress to revise the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952. The revised act provided for the “parole” of refugees from Communist nations into the United States, with a provision for their permanent residency. The Act of July 25, 1968, granted permanent residence to those Hungarians admitted to the United States following the October 1956 revolution.[3] Approximately 200,800 Hungarians escaped, about two percent of the population; 38,000 were admitted to the United States.[4]

The Hungarian refugees were not the first major wave of Hungarians to enter the United States. Because Hungary was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire prior to World War I, it is hard to get precise figures, but it is estimated that between 1870 and 1920 close to two million Hungarians entered American ports. This large and early migration settled primarily in the cities of the Midwest: Cleveland, Detroit, Columbus, Indianapolis, St. Louis, but also in New York and Los Angeles. Like the majority of

turn-of-the-century immigrants, they were generally of peasant or working-class origin and set up their own churches and ethnic organizations around tightly knit urban neighborhoods. Politically, the older group has been characterized as leftist in orientation. In contrast, the post-1956 middle- and upper-middle-class immigrants tended to be strongly anti-Communist. They also were highly educated and technically trained. Many became economically successful shortly after their arrival because of their educational status and because the economy of the 1950s was a growing one, especially in the areas of scientific and technological development. The post-1956 immigrants, therefore, did not have a great deal in common with their earlier-arriving countrymen.[5]

Thomas Blatt was born in Budapest in 1933. His family was from the upper middle class, his father a doctor and his mother a librarian. “My father’s family was Jewish; my mother’s family was Lutheran. I was brought up as a Catholic. Not really, but I was registered as a Catholic, so I had to go to Catholic religious classes in the school.” Mr. Blatt was ten years old when his father died in a military hospital in the Soviet Union of wounds sustained while fighting with the Hungarian (Fascist) forces. “Everyone fought on the wrong side during that war.”

Mr. Blatt’s father’s side of the family had been watchmakers for generations. His mother’s family was blessed with a towering intellectual and moral force—his grandmother, who was a leader of the Hungarian feminist movement, raised six children, and wrote three books, dying at ninety-three in the middle of a fourth.

Mr. Blatt studied at the University of Budapest, but left during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. He was graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with a master’s in engineering and received a master’s in business

administration from Boston University by attending night classes. He has been working for over sixteen years at a Boston-area technical company, where he is a manager and a vice president of a new subsidiary heavily involved with international operations.

Through my acquaintance with Mr. Blatt’s American wife I was introduced to him and invited out to their home. The Blatts have two children. It was a winter evening, and their large old elegant home had a fire going as I entered. I found Mr. Blatt charming, relaxed, and friendly.

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I was twenty-three when I left; I had just finished college. I was reasonably adult so I remember everything in detail; in fact, the whole thing started at our university. The uprising was a completely spontaneous matter. If it hadn't been, it would have never happened at all because they would have stopped it.

It was very interesting the way it started. Even the day it started there was no indication. What happened was that Hungary became a Communist country more or less in 1949. Until about 1954, when Stalin died, it was total repression. And then when Stalin died it became a little bit lighter. The intellectuals, the writers, and what have you became more and more open, and by 1956 it became pretty open with criticism of certain aspects of the system.

In 1848 there was a big revolution everywhere in Europe—the longest one was in Hungary, which lasted into 1849. There was a very famous Polish general who fought on the side of the Hungarians. In 1956 there was an uprising in Poland that was beaten down. The university students, as a gesture, marched on October 23rd, 22nd, to the statue of this general Bem. They put some flowers there to protest the beating down of the youth movement in Poland.

The entire Hungarian government was outside the country—they visited Tito in Yugoslavia as a peace gesture. Suddenly about 100,000 people collected in front of the Parliament. That's the way the whole thing started. I wasn't there at the statue, but I was at the Parliament—it was a few blocks from where I lived.

Nobody got organized. We just saw a lot of people walking, and we started walking with them. The architects, in fact, started to put together some demands to the government. In 1848 the greatest poet in Hungary's history put together a list of fourteen points, what the people wanted, and the architecture students put a letter of fourteen points. I wasn't there, but then the fourteen points were read into the radio because the crowd occupied the radio station. But again, it was just a crowd, no leaders, nothing. And in fact the leader whom the crowd wanted was a Communist, who was a previous prime minister of Hungary, a moderate—Imre Nagy.

Then on October 23rd they started the shooting. It was very disorganized. The real fighting was outside the city, mostly by the armies. There were some individual groups who took it upon themselves to occupy a church or something. Anyway, it was pretty serious because the Russians had to regroup November 4th, which was ten days or two weeks later. On that day the tanks and everybody came in with two hundred thousand soldiers. It was just ridiculous at that point. On November 9th, we realized it's all over, and on November 13th we left.

I didn't have to get out of there. I always wanted to get out of there, but it was hopeless. There was no serious possibility because the border was mined. Hungary was completely surrounded by Communist countries: Czechoslovakia in the north, Yugoslavia in the south, and of course Russia in the east and Romania in the southeast. There is a very small border with Austria and that was completely mined, so there was no way to go through. They picked up the mines in the summer of '56 and that made it possible to go out. The Hungarian army did it because the tension relaxed.

The decision [to leave] was a spontaneous one. We were thinking about it before, but we never really materialized it in our mind. For a few days, after October 23rd, we thought the uprising might succeed, but even that was mixed euphoria, not quite complete euphoria. In Hungary there is a famous joke: “If you meet one Hungarian, that’s a Hungarian; two Hungarians mean sex, three Hungarians mean four political parties.” We had about twenty-five political parties there and nobody knew who wanted what. It was difficult to establish whether what is coming would be worse, better, or even different. There was no leadership. In fact, the new leaders were also members of the Communist party, so it was not quite sure at that point what was going to happen.

Saying good-bye wasn’t so easy. I was an only child, and I lived with my mother and my grandmother. Two of my friends and I decided one evening to leave the next morning. I spoke to my mother. She was a very enlightened person, sort of an ideal woman, in many ways. My friends used to come to talk to her because they felt that my mother was a better mother to them than their mothers. The relationship between us was a very interesting one, a very intellectual relationship, in a way. She was very wise.

I used my sarcastic sense of humor before leaving. When she said, “What are you taking with you?” I said, “I am taking with me my school papers, a bathing suit, and a deck of cards.” I still have those cards. I was a great cardplayer all my life. When I was fourteen years old I was playing cards till three in the morning, making more money than my mother did at her job.

If you want to hear how I got captured and came out of Hungary, that is a long story. I have to drink when I talk about that one.

One of the three friends left earlier and he went through. I had a girl friend whom I wanted to marry at that point, but she didn't want to come. It was difficult to leave her. It had a long-lasting effect on my life—but anyway, the remaining two of us left. He lives here now.

There was a general strike, there was no transportation. We carried our suitcases. Each of us had four bottles of apricot brandy and our bathing suits. You have to carry all this, because Hungarian apricot brandy is something with which you can bribe anybody any time.

So we waved down a military truck which was going in the correct direction. They stopped and we waved a bottle of brandy and they took us on the truck halfway to the Austrian border. We got blank permits and forged our name on them because there was a limit beyond which you couldn't go west. So we left. We hired a car. There is a city called Győr, which is halfway between Budapest and Vienna. We slept there at night. The next morning we rented this car and were taken to a canal. We had to go across that which was rather difficult and we started to build a raft. We went to a farmer and bought nails and what have you. We knew that to the right is Czechoslovakia and to the left is Austria. There is a bridge and Russians were there so we had to be careful. At night they were shooting right away, so we had to go during the day, at which point the worst that can happen is that they capture us but they won't shoot us, so it was complicated.

Suddenly a third guy showed up, an older guy. He said he would like to join us. Well, fine. The problem was that this raft that we built would take only one man. So we decided that we would make a rope out of scarves. One guy goes over and pulls the scarves. Then we can pull the raft back with the scarf, and the next guy goes over and whoever is left can pull it back, and the third guy goes over. This third guy fell

off the raft and into the water and started to yell; it was very cold water. At this point, for the first time in my life I got drunk.

Finally they captured us; they put us in a camp. We were there for six hours at the border. Then they put us on a truck, and they started to take us east. We didn't know whether they would stop in Hungary or take us to Siberia. By that time it was around midnight and we were back in the city of Győr. We came in this truck which was full of all the people they had captured. There was this guy who was driving the truck in front and there was a guy with a gun who was beside him, but he could not see us. The truck was going about thirty-five or forty kilometers per hour, not too fast. So we decided we are going to escape.

I was the one who jumped off first and my friend threw down the two small suitcases. Then he jumped down and then the third guy jumped down, who broke his leg. We picked him up, we took him to a house, and we left him there.

Next day we tried to escape again, which was a much more difficult situation because it started to snow. Then my friend said, "Let's go home, because there is the snow; they will capture us right away."

I said, "All right, let's try one more time and let's start walking." Then we walked down to the city. It's a city of about eighty thousand or one hundred thousand people. Suddenly we saw a big truck with all kinds of people on it. "Where are you going?"

They said, "Well, we are all truck drivers. We are going to the border because a lot of truck drivers escaped from Hungary to Austria and there are all the empty trucks we have to pick up there."

So they took us and they drove us much further west than the previous time. There is a city called Sopron, which is right on the border. They dropped us maybe five miles from the border. It was all covered with snow. We didn't know what to do. We didn't know where we were and we asked somebody.

Imagine this. Suddenly you see railroad tracks. It is like a groove in the land which is dug out for the train, and there are the tracks. The guy says, "Well, the best thing is to go down there, because they won't see you, because the Russians are all over at the top." So I started to go, and suddenly there is a guy with a machine gun, a border guard.

He says, "Where are you going?" and my friend says, "We are going to the movie." [Laughs.]

He says, "Seriously, where are you going?" and we told him, "We want to go out." What can you tell him? We tell the guy the truth, "We want to get the hell out of here."

The guy started to go into a philosophical discussion. "You know that this is a nice country. Why do you want to leave?"

We said, "We really want to come back, but we just really want to go out to study. We are students." Finally I said, "Look, I give you all the money we have. We don't need it, anyway. Take it."

So the guy said, "All right. It is five miles to the border. It is five miles to go and you have forty-five minutes. You have forty-five minutes because in about forty-five minutes the train will come," which is the Orient Express. "When the train comes you have two things to do, you either climb up there, in which case you would be captured, or you let the train run over you."

So we started to run. We passed about one hundred and fifty people. Apparently he let everybody through. We passed these people and we ran like crazy. I was in tremendous

physical condition. So we were going like crazy and we were totally dead, and finally fell down onto the Austrian side of the border. Three more people came, then came the train. Then nobody came. We barely made it. That's the way I got out.

What happened after that? I didn't have a clue what I wanted to do. Twenty-three years old, highly educated, highly intelligent, totally immature, and totally lost.

We were in Austria for a while and then we went to Paris, where my friend had relatives. I was in Paris for a while, which I loved. I thought, "I don't want to stay in Europe, I want to go to America for a while." So I decided to go to Canada.

I flew from Vienna in one of those really old airplanes which had to stop at every big tree, so it stopped in Belgium and Scotland and Iceland and had to stop in Gander and finally Montreal. My first experience you should write a book about. I arrived in Gander, Newfoundland. Yes, forty-three below zero, six feet of snow and the Salvation Army playing music for the refugees who arrived. Then you go into the inside of the airport and you see on the television wrestling—four guys are killing each other. I said, "Jesus, what a place we came to!"

There were agencies. There was the whole International, God knows what. They processed everybody—where you wanted to go—and got visas.

I decided I'd go to a place where I don't know anybody because I have relatives everywhere: Australia, South America, Sweden. I went to Canada because I didn't want to become dependent on anyone. I went to Montreal for awhile. I hated it, but looking back it's not such a bad place.

As to English I didn't know a damn thing. I started to learn it in Paris already—I didn't speak very well, but

anyway, I got a job. Not so bad, actually. I didn't even have such a bad salary, in fact. And I rented a room in the best part of the city. That's the Hungarian philosophy, live in the cheapest room in the best hotel.

In Montreal there were seventy thousand Hungarians. Montreal is a fantastic Hungarian center. [But] I was too lonely. I was missing my girl friend and everything else, but anyway. I couldn't stand the cold winter, the hot summer. After three months I decided that I wanted to go back to school.

I chose M.I.T. very happily later, because that was on the East Coast and I didn't want to go far west. I thought, "The East is still closer to Europe"—there is still this attraction. So in September I came down. I saved $1,100 in six months, which was a lot of money since my salary was only $360 a month. I worked a lot of overtime. I also played cards. [Laughs.]

What were your first impressions of the United States?

What is the impression of a civilized people going into a jungle? This is not a different country, this is a different world. The difference between even western Europe and the United States is great. It's much, much bigger than even a Communist country and a non-Communist country, in my opinion. Number one, the whole place seemed like a nonpermanent residence.

It was a big shock walking in Central Square, Cambridge. You expected that you have to go to Africa to find a place like Central Square in Cambridge. Central Square in Cambridge is so primitive even today. You don't believe that people live permanently in tiny little wooden houses one beside the other, and then combined with the great ethnic and racial mixture: blacks, whites, Arabs! It was a big shock walking in Central Square in Cambridge and the downtown area of

Boston, Washington Street. Compared with the Champs Elysees in Paris, it was a very depressing feeling.

My first impressions were negative. First, I remember there was the total lack of quality in municipal government. Second was the way they treat the old. Third was the lack of health care, and fourth was that I thought the people were so uptight sexually. At the time I felt that people had a wall; they were closed. My impressions were not all bad. These were cultural shocks, which were very difficult.

Of course there was much that was positive. You can go anywhere you want, any time you want. I was a student at M.I.T., had no background, nothing. And credit. They sold me a $1,500 car in 1958 and I didn't put down a penny. Nobody asked me questions. That was incomprehensible. That is fantastic!

I found people extremely generous here, much more involved, sometimes too much involved, in other people's affairs. People were friendly to me. I found that it might have been because I was an Hungarian.

You said you were in Hungary last year?

Last year I went to Europe. I went to Germany and Austria and Italy. So for the first time I decided to go back to Hungary.

All the people who had left Hungary had dreams—like you went back and they don't let you out again, all these things. I had that dream for a long time. But I was always feeling funny going back there. Finally I flew in. As soon as I got there, I didn't have any fears anymore. I had lots of relatives there, cousins and uncles and aunts. Several of them visited me here. My mother's family is extremely close.[1]

The first major surprise was that I had no feelings about that place. I felt like a tourist except that I knew the streets

and I knew the houses. I met people. I met everybody in the family: cousins who were two years old when I left. I met my old girl friend, whose marriage I screwed up once, and interestingly enough I showed up from nowhere and it turned out that I arrived five days before she was to get married again. I had a wonderful time. I think if you like to eat and have fun, nowhere in the world can you eat like that.

The Hungarian immigration was different because it was the top of the society. It was the cream of the crop of the college population. Do you know that I went there, that layer is missing, the people who are forty to forty-five years now, of top executives, scientists, writers. Two hundred thousand people left; two percent of the population. It’s a fantastic number.

I felt nostalgic about the reasonably easygoing life that those people have there. People see each other much more. They are much more socially outgoing than we are. People are poor, I’m sure, even in western European standards, certainly by American standards. The major value of my visit, I felt, was that what I remember was reality. That was the best thing I found out over there. You know, after twenty years you glorify certain things or make it look worse, and I think that my memory about Hungary and the life there and the people there was extremely realistic.