JOURNEY TO FREEDOM 1956

Prologue

The Hungarian Revolution is dated Oct 23 to Nov 10, 1956. Originally started by university students and joined by the civilian populous to outs the Russian troops in Hungary and make it a neutral country like Austria. On Nov4, 1956 shortly after having withdrawn Red Army Troops from Budapest to the surrounding countryside, the USSR, augmented their troops to the tune of 17 divisions, including 1000 tanks, various units of artillery and MIG bombers. They then proceeded to surround Budapest in a “ Blitzkrieg “ campaign. The overwhelming Russian numbers and equipment killed over 30,000 people in Budapest alone as well as wounding 20,000. The revolutionaries were suppressed by Nov 10th, and the country was in a lockdown, with borders closed with barbed-wire fences, watch towers and landmines.

Yet, 200,000 refugees escaped with the majority, 180,000 exiting via Austria and 20,000 via Yugoslavia. Canada took the most refugees, 37,500, while the USA took in 30,000.

Leaving Budapest

One family’s story is not unique, but it is mine. My name is Vilike, my father is Vili ( Senior …and short form of Vilmos ) and my mother is Ili, short form of Ilona. My father was an only child, as am I, and my mother is the eldest of 4 sisters, all of whom were married. After trying to convince other members of their family and close friends to come with them to no avail, they made the decision to try to escape the country by themselves .

Dec 8th, 1956. They took the 9am train to Gyor and finally arrived at the station in Farrad at 6pm that evening. We then walked 2km in the dark to the village where we hid for 2 days with some friendly townsfolk .

Dec 10th, 1956. The next train took us to Fertod, which was only a 15 km walk to the border. This had to be done in the dark with a local guide, as the last 30 meters was a tricky trail through a minefield. Prior to reaching the minefield, we had to scamper and hide in a ditch next the road, as we heard the rumbling of a Soviet Tank patrol heading our way. We held our breathes, and tried not to make any noise while they passed us by with the ground shaking beneath and around us. Finally, when all was quiet again, we followed our guide and soon saw the light from a lantern waving signalling that the coast was clear and we boarded a waiting Red Cross Train that took us to a schoolhouse in the nearby village of Pamhagen, Austria arriving at 8pm.

Dec 11th, 1956. At 2am, 2 busses arrived and took us to another railway station 1 ½ hours away. The train departed for Linz at 3am, arriving at 12 noon. Next we were bused to Refugee Camp #63 where we were assigned to a room with 6 beds that we shared with another family of 3.

Dec 14th, 1956. My father went to the Camp Office and applied for immigration to Australia. After meals, we would walk to town and marvel at all the wonderful products for sale in the shop windows.

Dec 22nd, 1956. At 10am we learned from the Camp Office that we were heading on to another camp near Innsbruke via the 3pm train. We arrived in Innsbrucke at 1am the following morning and we were met by some distant relatives that my father hadn’t seen in 12 years. Needless to say, there was lots of talk between them and we didn’t get to bed until 5am.

Dec 24th, 1956. Christmas Eve we were very fortunate to be able to send it with our distant relatives. They spoilt us with some lovely presents, and the next day we returned to their place for supper.

Jan 2nd, 1957. Our relatives were able to find a lovely Pensione in Telfes for us to stay in but could only afford to pay for 3 days; then we headed back to the immigrant camp near Innsbrucke.

Jan 15th, 1957. At 1pm, 2 busses arrived and transported us to Solbad Hall Camp.

Jan 20th, 1957. Still no word from our request to go to Australia, so my father went to visit his relatives to see if they could help us apply for an entry visa into Canada.

Jan 24th, 1957. At 4pm, the Catholic Society brought around a list of those eligible to go to Canada. We made the list, and so would first have to go for medical tests and then an interview at the Canadian Consulate in Vienna.

Jan 29th, 1957. First stop was Innsbrucke for the medical exam including X-Rays for my parents.

Feb 4th, 1957. The train for Vienna left from Innsbrucke at 10:30pm and arrived the following morning at 7:50am.

Feb 5th, 1957. We took a streetcar to the Canadian Embassy, arriving at 9am. We waited for 1 ½ hours in front of Room 219 before my dad was called in for his interview. They asked him numerous questions regarding what his trade was and what salary did he draw. Also asked if he was travelling with this family, and which family members did he leave behind in Hungary. Of course they asked him why he left and when; and was he a member of any political party. Next, we proceeded to Room 214 and after some more waiting, he was called in to sign some temporary papers. We were then bussed 1 ½ hours to a Canadian Immigrant Camp at Wiener Neustadt where we were assigned to a 40 bed dormitory room.

Feb 6th, 1957. We were reassigned to a 19 bed room where a family had just vacated for Canada.

Feb 8th, 1957. The I.C.E.M. ( Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration) Office advised us that we would be on the next ship leaving for Canada ( Berths # 233, 234, 235 on the CP owned Empress of Britain ) which was leaving Liverpool, England on Feb 15st and arriving Feb 21st in St. John, NB, Canada.

Feb 12th, 1957. My mother turned 32 today, and we got up at 4am to hand in our blankets and dishes, and at 7:30 am our bus headed to the Vienna Railway Station. We left the railyard at 9:22 am bound for Linz, Austria. At 5:30 pm we crossed into Germany at Passau, passed through Regensburg at 9:05 pm, Nuremberg at 10:20 pm, Wurzburg at 11:45 pm.

Feb 13th, 1957. We continued through Aschaffenburg at 1:15 am, Cologne at 6am, Aachen at 7:20 am, and crossed the Belgium border at Herbesthal at 8 am. At 12:45 pm we were put on a ferry at Oostende, Belgium and arrived in England at Dover at 6pm that evening. Our next train departed Liverpool at 7:20 pm.

Feb 14th, 1957. We arrived in Liverpool at 2:30 am and had to remain on the train until 6:45 am when 2 lorries came to pick up our luggage while 6 double decker buses tranported all the refugees. We were taken to a school where we were given breakfast and at 08:30 am were finally taken to our ship, The Empress of Britian. They assigned us to a 4 berth tourist cabin with bunk beds and a small table. We were served supper at 5 pm by a 30 year old cabin boy named Mickey Rooney.

Feb 15th – Feb 20th, 1957. It was a rough crossing at times, and both my parents got sea sick a lot; not being used to the cuisine was also a contributing factor. Most passengers got ill as this was for many the first time on the high seas. The routine generally was, go eat, lay back down on their beds, throw up, and repeat over and over again. The children faired better; I especially enjoyed going and spending lots of time in the playroom. Only real excitement was passing an iceberg ( 4-500 metres away ) 4 days into the crossing and a party night that evening complete with balloons, party favors and a special dinner.

Feb 21st, 1957. Sunshine in the morning and we can finally see land, which we are told is Canada. We docked in St. John, NB at 3:30 pm but we could not leave the ship until 10:20 pm, when we were taken to a Customs Building and spent the next two days there.

Feb 22nd, 1957. In the morning, more medicals including X-Rays followed by a evening concert put on by a local church group with coffee and cake at 10:20 pm.

Feb 23rd, 1957. More paperwork, and then we received some donated clothes from a local organization. Next we got our train tickets and at 9 pm we boarded a sleeper car and departed on our 5 day rumble across Canada. We marvelled at the deep snow outside and enjoyed the dining car which was better than eating on the rocking ship.

Feb 24th, 1957. The train arrives in Montreal at 5pm and leaves at 10:40 that night. Feb 25th, we reached Port Arthur at 11:30 pm and on Feb 26th at 10 am we rolled into Winnipeg. Feb 26th finds us in Calgary at 7 am, and at 11:45 am we cross the border into British Columbia. From 1pm until 2:30 pm we have to wait while the tracks are cleared from a snow slide before we can proceed.

Feb 28th, 1957. Since 5am, it is slow going as we weave our way through high mountains, many tunnels, rushing streams and cascading waterfalls. At Mission, our train is split up, and our section takes a different rail line that brings us to Abbotsford. We are met by two busses that take us to the old WWII airbase that has been converted to a refugee camp. Actually, 3000 Hungarian refugees were processed through here in a few months; quite amazing.

Mar 1-4, 1957. My mother has a huge load of laundry to handwash and English classes are provided whenever they can be made available.

Mar 5, 1957. There is an announcement by the camp authorities that a Catholic and Protestant church in Port Alberni, on Vancouver Island, were each looking to sponsor a family. We applied.

Mar 6, 1957. Sadly, we were not selected to go to Port Alberni because my parents had a child. At 10 pm this evening, 250 more Hungarian Refugees arrived.

Mar 9, 1957. The Red Cross had brought in clothes for the refugees and later that afternoon, 350 more refugees arrived bringing the total to around 820.

Mar 10, 1957. Big excitement today, as the local car club was given permission to run some drag races on one the runways. Also, a local soccer club has invited a team made up of refugees from the camp, to play some matches.

Mar 30, 1957. Today marked the arrival of 300 refugees who had escaped via Holland.

Apr 3, 1957. We received word to be ready with suitcases packed to leave at 6pm for Vanderhoof.

Apr 4, 1957. We arrived in Prince George at 10 am and were met by and hosted by a lovely Canadian family for the night.

Apr 5, 1957. The train to Vanderhoof left at 7 am and two hours later we arrived. First we went to the local hospital for more check-ups and then the 2 families who had arrived with us got placed with their sponsor. We were placed with a family who owned a farm 6 km from town. They had 6 children and the wife was in hospital expecting the lucky (?) 7th child. My mother instantly became the chef and caregiver for all the children at the farm. She was never sure if they liked the food she cooked as she only knew how to cook Hungarian meals. My father helped in digging latrines and painting all the rooms inside the farmhouse. Our accommodations were inside an old garage with plank siding and there were gaps between the boards where you could see daylight coming through. My mother had quite the chore to clean the dirt and grease off the floorboards. We all slept in the same bed with our coats to keep us warm. Eventually a local charity brought out a space heater to keep the garage above zero and also donated an old comforter.

Epilogue

One day we received word via a letter from an acquaintance, whom we had met at the Abbotsford Refugee Camp and had been selected to go to Port Alberni. He advised us that many jobs would become available as a pulp and paper mill plant was going to open up soon. My father decided to go there ahead of us and try and secure a job and then send for us when he did. He was fortunate to get a job at the McLean’s Sawmill while waiting for a job at the pulp mill. Sadly, he hurt his back at the sawmill, but he was able to eventually get a position at the paper mill. Then he sent for my mother and I, and that is how we ended up settling in Alberni.