



Newspaper photograph of the groups of refugees that came to the US in December 1956.
Woods Hole, Cape Cod.

From left to right: Klara Miskolczy, Kristina Miskolczy, Ferenc Borbiro, Esther Miskolczy,
Lászlo Miskolczy, and Babszi Bodroghy

REMOVE TROUBLE FROM YOUR HEART

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Memory 1956

Help. Help. Help. SOS. SOS. SOS.

I will never forget November 4, 1956. I woke up at dawn to deafening noises that I took to be fireworks celebrating the success of the previous days' revolution. I was thirteen and my sister in the other bed in the room was eleven. I lay in bed listening contentedly watching the light flash through the shutters after all the excitement that went before. Then my parents rushed into the room, since we had the only radio, and turned it on. The euphoria was short-lived. The Russians were shelling the city, tanks were rolling on the street and the revolution was over. The revolutionary Prime Minister, Imre Nagy, was on the radio shortly. Nagy's voice shook with restrained emotion as he informed the public that the Russians had attacked Budapest that morning, that the Hungarian government and the troops would do everything to defend the country and that he was thus informing the rest of the world as to what happened, implying that he hoped for help. The announcement was short, bleak, and deadly serious. Then they played the national anthem with its sad words of defeat and survival and sonorous music written in 1848 when the revolution of independence against Austria was put down by the Russian army. Then there was quiet on the radio and someone put on Beethoven's Seventh Symphony which was perhaps lying about the studio and that was played over and over in its serious and powerful harmonies all day long. It was more moving than any words would have been. I sat quietly by the radio crying.

About seven in the morning someone announced on the radio that the UN Security Council was going to discuss the situation in Hungary. Everyone was elated. Radio Free Europe had been encouraging anti-soviet activities in the Iron Curtain countries for years with the implication that the West in general and the US in particular would help when necessary. It was now necessary and there was infinite hope that the West would come across.

By eight AM however nothing more happened than the Russian ultimatum that if the insurgency did not end they would bomb the city

from the air. (Which luckily they never did.) I learned later that in the evening the Vienna Associated Press office got a telex message from the Hungarian Writers' Association to please tell the world what is happening in Hungary, saying the radio was still in the insurgents' hands and ended with "Help, Help, Help, SOS, SOS, SOS." But the West did not come then or later; they remained silent.

Then about 8 PM Beethoven stopped playing and the station went blank. The Russians had taken over the radio and there were no more revolutionary broadcasts. We spent the day glued to the radio, unable to believe that all was over. We went out on the terrace and watched the Russian tanks like giant caterpillars drive up and down the hill road. Buda, where we were living, was in the suburban hills part of Budapest, a city divided in two by the Danube. In Buda we were far from the actual fighting which was mostly in Pest. We could hear the artillery, see the tanks, but we were relatively safe. There was nothing to do.

Sporadic gunfire continued for days and even weeks after November 4, but basically it was all over in one day. The Russians and Communism were back to stay. I would have to go on studying the declension of Russian words which I hated. The "normalcy" of communism would return. Imre Nagy and whomever they could get ahold of were found and eventually executed. It is said that Eisenhower did not help Hungary for fear of unleashing a war with Russia, sort of a Third World War. Maybe he was right, maybe he was not. We will never know. But Hungarians who had tended to idolize the West were deeply embittered by this abandonment.

The revolution had started ten days earlier on October 23, when a demonstration unexpectedly took over the radio station and began broadcasting anti-communist incitements. It was spontaneously joined by students, factory workers, inhabitants of Budapest and by people all over the country. The country had had enough of the Russian regime and simply erupted. One of their immediate aims was purely symbolic – toppling the colossal bronze Stalin statue which required professional welders to accomplish. Only his boots remained and on the photos one can see that they were as tall as two people, one on top of the other. Having vented this rage on the statue, the populace, in organizational meetings, announced the demands of the revolution – the hated Russian puppet leader Mátyás Rákosi, the butt of jokes with his bald head, was to

be removed, and Imre Nagy was to take his place. Imre Nagy was still a communist – Hungarians did not imagine that they could get away without a communist – but he was closest in spirit to the revolution and the desire for freedom from Russia and totalitarian rule. The aim of the revolution was to get rid of the Russians occupying the country since 1945 and of their communist puppets. All this coalesced in the demand for Imre Nagy as Prime Minister.

On the morning of the 24th of October, the telephone kept ringing with my classmates' mothers full of rumors about an uprising the night before. My mother did not let us go to school and the day before was the last I ever went. It then seemed like a welcome day of vacation. My father was not in town; he was at the vineyard overseeing the harvest and knew nothing about the revolution for days. There were rumors that boys as young as fourteen and eleven were joining the insurgents and though we were girls my mother was very concerned that we should not go out of the house and get killed. She made us solemnly swear that we would not go out of the house or if we did, for some reason, we would not speak to anyone. She was afraid of our idealism. There was nothing for it but to sit by the radio and listen to the bulletins, all of which were encouraging. The bulletins were interspersed with music. The heroism of the young boys was awe-inspiring, perhaps some of my classmates were involved; I didn't know. It was hard to sit by the radio all day. The rebellion was succeeding even to the point that Imre Nagy formed a provisional government. While at first no one believed in its success, the days passed and it seemed to be succeeding, and people started believing. Hundreds of nameless individuals cut the communist emblem out of the red, white, and green Hungarian flag, and flags with holes hung from windows all over Budapest. There were Russian tanks but they hadn't mounted a major counteroffensive, and there were also Molotov cocktails to take care of them. For almost ten days there was the heady scent of success. Hungarians claimed that the Russians rarely got out of their tanks due to a supposed order keeping them in there so the soldiers would not see how much higher the standard of living was even in communist Hungary than in Russia and foment a rebellion of their own. Poems were written, jokes were passed around among the freedom fighters. After it was all over these were carefully kept in hiding places as sacred relics.

After a few days of staying in the house we had to go out to get provisions such as milk, eggs, bread, flour. There were immediate shortages in the stores everywhere and I remember standing in endless lines buying whatever was available under the watchful eyes of patrolling tanks. It seemed to my thirteen-year-old self that revolutions consisted of standing in line for victuals. In the lines people talked. They talked about acts of heroism witnessed by someone, about children running away from home, about what the Americans would or would not do. My father arrived a few days later. His car was full of fruit – apples, grapes, pears, country fare – and he came through where the action was in Pest, finally seeing for himself the truth of the rumors of a successful rebellion. He gave most of his food to the freedom fighters who were eager to have it since food was getting scarce. He arrived full of excitement, telling of first-hand contacts with the freedom fighters. My mother was very glad to see him back in this crisis. I don't know all the things my father did in the subsequent days except that he went to his office and gave everyone, including himself, the secret information the communists kept on them. These were sort of "reliability cards" kept locked up for communist eyes only. His own card read: "Upper middle class background and entirely unreliable."

For the first few days of November as nothing happened either from the Russians or from the West, we all settled down to believing that the rebellion was miraculously successful, that Hungary got out from under the Russian yoke and life would be better. In this my father was as naïve as anyone else. We children were elated by excitement and visions of a new world which of course we could not even imagine. No one could sleep well and we did nothing restlessly during the day.

One of the first things the revolutionaries did was to open the borders so people could go freely to "the West." Some people did not wait to find out how the revolution would turn out but collected their valuables and took trains, cars, carts out of the country immediately. I don't know when my father started to think about it because this topic was not discussed with us children. However, I am sure that it was days after November 4 since my parents believed in the success of the revolution until then. In the next ten days there were many comings and goings and secret discussions between my parents from which we were excluded and we wondered what was happening. Sometime around the fifteenth of

November we were told that my mother's nerves were acting up from all this excitement and we had to go visit some relatives in the country where it was quiet. We were to visit Babszi, my aunt Marta's sister in Keszthely. We were also to wear two sets of our oldest and grubbiest clothes, which in our case meant pleated skirts and sweaters, because we were not to carry luggage. We just had little handbags. As the weather was freezing cold, we needed overcoats and winter gear. Thus bundled up we set out one morning, it could have been on foot or by taxi, I don't remember, but in any case, we left the precious car in the garage, locked the door, left all of our belongings, including the cat, and set off towards the Southern Railway Station which wasn't terribly far.

At this point general chaos reigned in the city. At the railway station there were some trains on the tracks, but no schedules, tickets or visible railway agents. We got into a car not knowing fully where it was going, but from that station trains generally went west. The cars were full of people staring sternly ahead and not wanting to say a word to anyone. We sat in total and uncomfortable silence pretending that all was normal. Were they all going for a few days vacation to soothe their nerves? After a few hours the train began to move and it went a certain distance. Then it stopped and we got out with all the rest of the people waiting on the platform to see if some other train would come. Eventually another unscheduled train showed up and by taking three or more trains some unspecified distances, we arrived in Keszthely. We had been to Keszthely before some summer; it is a nice little town on Lake Balaton, and we knew my aunt Babszi well since she often visited in Budapest. When she did, she showed pictures of her sons Thomas and Balint who had all successfully snuck out of the country years before and were now in Australia and Canada. She would tease me and say that I would one day marry one of them. She lived in Keszthely with her father, a very distinguished looking man of eighty I hardly knew. Keszthely was a place where my mother could have found peace and quiet away from the crushed revolution in Budapest. However, here too there were lots of secret discussions among the grownups to which we were not privy, and a few days later it was announced that we would go on to visit yet another relative, never heard of, who lived much further west near the Austrian border.

It did not require great genius from a thirteen-year-old to figure out that we were leaving the country just like all those people on the trains. My sister and I confronted our parents with this interpretation and they finally told the truth. My father claimed that he did not tell us for our own good – had the Russians beaten us up we would have blurted out the truth and we would have all been killed. Leaving the country was a crime punishable by death. Not telling us meant, however, that we did not have a chance to say goodbye to our favorite dolls, to our cat, nor could we take some little memento with us. We never said goodbye to our friends and classmates, most of whom we never saw again. We left to go to the country for a few days and never came back.

With some more irregular trains we went to a little village, whose name I discovered only in the last ten years, Csepreg, which I then thought was some kind of a farmstead but was in fact the house of relative of Babszi. Babszi and her father came with us apparently planning to leave the country together. In all likelihood it may be Babszi's intense desire to go that pushed my father over the line in making the decision. By the time we got to Csepreg it was November 20 or so, and the communist government was reestablishing the border. It was not yet an "iron curtain," but one could no longer walk across in broad daylight with all one's possessions. The border had to be crossed at night and local young men acted as guides to be paid in wristwatches and jewelry. One could no longer set out alone, one needed serious help. Russian tanks were already active in the area. My father found some local young men who suggested that a good way of crossing the border was by lying on the bottom of a hay cart with hay piled on top making us invisible. Such a scheme was generally agreed to for the following day.

The next day the young men arrived quite shaken up. They had done the hay ride with some other people the night before but the Russians got wind of it and shot into the carts, killing those persons. If we wanted to go we would have to walk. Was the eighty-year-old gentleman capable of nine kilometers on rough terrain? He insisted he was, probably thinking what did he have to lose, he wanted to see his other daughter once more in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, USA. Then the young men examined us saying we had to get rid of all bags and possessions and go just with our clothes on our backs. My mother had a small bag she was very reluctant to give up. "What's in the bag?" asked the

young men laughing and opened the zipper – it was full of chocolate bars and soap. Blushing, my mother explained that this was in case we were made prisoners; the soap was to keep us clean and the chocolate bars were quick energy. Everyone laughed. Of course if they made prisoners of us we would be shot on the spot. In the end everything was removed and we waited for late at night to set off.

We were to walk arm in arm or hand in hand. My sister and I, my mother and father, and Babszi and her father. There was a cloudy sky with the moon occasionally visible as through a transparent curtain. Most of the time it was completely dark. The temperature was at or near freezing. Generally, we were walking over newly plowed fields that had frozen rock solid. The furrows were over a foot deep and irregular, so that at every step you fell or were likely to fall into the next one. The rhythm was step-fall-pick yourself up, step-fall-pick yourself up. My sister and I held onto each other as we bobbed up and down without rhyme or rhythm, gritting our teeth. All talking was forbidden and we walked in complete silence. Between concentrating on the furrows and being afraid of the Russians we sometimes thought of all our known world that was receding and of the unknown we were going towards. It was a very strange excitement.

At one point we had to cross a bridge over a river patrolled by tanks and were suddenly motioned to fall into a ditch by a guide so as not to be seen by the Russian searchlights patrolling every inch of the area. There was a rumbling in the distance. We could hear the tank approaching closer, the searchlight swiveling in every direction. My heart was pounding and I was holding my breath. One false move from any one of us and we would be dead. I remember involuntarily raising my head at one point and one of the young men yanking me down to earth by my ponytail very hard. They passed around a flask of brandy as everyone lay there shivering in the ditch. There were several more hours of frozen furrows to cross, numb with cold and fear, but luckily there were no other encounters with Russians. The border itself was not marked by anything except a very shallow ditch easy to overlook. When we were on the other side the guides collected the wristwatches and we thanked them. They were doing this in the spirit of the revolution, not merely for gain, and their lives were at risk every night. By December crossing the border

became very difficult. But in that short time two hundred thousand people left Hungary.

We crossed the border on November 24 and followed the lights the guides pointed out to Austria. The Austrians were very kind. We woke up someone at 2 AM and were eventually put in a church with other refugees. Through the help of private individuals and local charities we managed to get to Vienna in a few days. My father had contacts there and evidently someone owed him enough money so we could stay in a cheap hotel for about a week. We had no clothes except what we were wearing – the local charities gave us something clean.

We had to go to Vienna to register as refugees and to look for a host country. We were fingerprinted, questioned and investigated. After all, we could have been spies. They were investigating by cross-examining other refugees as to whether we told the truth about who we were, what our characters were. Hungary is a small country, a lot of people knew each other – it was amazing how quickly the truth came out. They asked nothing of us girls.

Vienna was full of Hungarian refugees and my parents ran into several friends. “You left, too!” “Yes, you left, too!” Various countries had representatives accepting refugees and people moved excitedly from one to the other. Where should they go? My father had two possible destinations in mind – Brussels in Belgium and Sao Paulo in Brazil – since in both he had architect friends who could help him get a job. He spoke French which made Belgium more practical, but probably he could learn Portuguese. But the real surprise in Vienna was that the US, which had hitherto only a tiny quota for Hungarians, opened its doors to let in a great number. (Previously Babszi’s sons had to go to Australia and Canada because the US did not allow them in.) This generosity was perhaps in compensation for not actually aiding the revolution, but nevertheless it was much appreciated. The choice was dizzying. My father never considered going to the US before but now he considered it. The reason for it was family – what family we had abroad was in the US. There was the much hated Marta who left my father’s brother for Albert Szent-Györgyi, who had received the Nobel Prize, and her two children my cousins Gabor and Orsi who were now grown. With us was Babszi, Marta’s sister. Shouldn’t the family be all together even if it’s the US? He talked to Marta on the telephone and she was eager that we should

come; she emphasized the opportunities and she couldn’t wait to see her sister and father. And maybe for my father this was the biggest adventure of them all. For a while all was in flux. Where will we feel most at home – Europe, North or South America? What language should we speak – French, Portuguese or English? We children were never asked our opinion just as we were never asked whether we wanted to leave Hungary in the first place. My father signed us all up for the US.

Having chosen the US my father geared up for action. None of us spoke a word of English so he bought a German-English language book and held English classes in the hotel room every day. He claimed that during the First World War he met some English sailors on the Danube in Baja who taught him a few phrases. The first lesson in the book suggested learning a specific sentence, which has become unforgettable to me: “The early bird catches the worm.” What was the author thinking of? My father pronounced it sort of in the Queen’s English as “Da arly bard katches da varm.” We had to unlearn all these memorized sayings in the US.

Thinking that this was some kind of cultural tour, my father dragged us through all kinds of museums in Vienna where he particularly wanted us to see his favorite Brueghel paintings, which I remember only as a blur of little figures. This was the West with its fabled arts that he had not been allowed to see all these years. Somehow our minds were not on paintings. My mother wanted to see the movie “Gone With The Wind” which was then playing in the movie theaters. The book was forbidden by the communists because they thought the conflict between the Confederacy and the Union in the US might spark a civil war in Hungary. My mother probably wanted to see Vivian Leigh. But in the scenes of the burning of Atlanta she got hysterical and we all started crying because it was too reminiscent of the shelling of Budapest and so we had to leave the movie theater without seeing the end. The normalcy my father required of us was sometimes too much.

Once we got on the US list at a certain point we had to go to a camp and wait there to be assigned means of travel. Our camp near Wiener Neustadt was probably as good as refugee camps go, with overcrowded beds, epidemics of diarrhea and unclean toilets, and the two weeks seemed like an eternity. We were then moved to another camp near the airport until finally we were on the airplane crossing the Atlantic. For us

children this crossing has remained memorably awful. None of the Hungarians on the plane had ever been in an airplane, including us. The plane was an old four-engined propeller plane, two of whose engines stopped functioning halfway across the Atlantic. We had to stop twice, in Shannon and Gander, to refuel. There was not only plenty of turbulence, there was a storm across the Atlantic. People sighed, moaned, and screamed most of the way "Oh my God, Oh my God" (*Istenem, Istenem*). We also, pretty much all, threw up the whole time convulsively. The stewardesses vainly tried to serve coffee, it kept spilling all over. I remember that flight as smelling of coffee, oranges and vomit. However, we made it to Camp Kilmer in New Jersey.

In retrospect that nightmarish journey expressed everyone's state of mind. We were all devastated by the collapse of the revolution, by having left home in the hands of ruthless communists and though we were alive, ahead of us was an unknown deeper than the Atlantic we were so afraid of falling into with the wobbly plane. We felt guilty that we were leaving our homeland. We had no idea what lay ahead, what monsters had to be battled, what pains to be endured or even what joys were to be found, but we were going to somewhere strange and foreign and who is to say that we would be at home there? It wasn't just my mother whose nerves were acting up; everyone's nerves were on the very edge. So we vomited and screamed throughout the crossing.

Camp Kilmer was wonderful. A military unit used for civilian purposes, it was large, bright, and clean with plenty of room for bunk beds for families. The most amazing was the dining room where big blacks with broad smiles ladled out large servings of meats, potatoes, vegetables, cakes and jello on metal trays with compartments for each, with as many seconds as you wanted. People went back to their bunks with oranges, bananas, and apples but were too full to eat them before the next gargantuan meal. Megaphones asked people not to take food back since it was rotting on the windowsills and they would get enough the next meal. The refugees, however, were not used to this and continued hoarding food. There was also a supply room in which there were huge piles of new clothes – mostly sturdy army socks and underwear. One could take as much as one wanted. We had been wearing our clothes for a month and fresh underwear was great.

Marta's son Gabor came to fetch us in a few days with a station wagon big enough for all seven of us. A young physicist, he was our first introduction to America outside the camp. The trip to me was something from science fiction. I was amazed by the four-lane highways with the double yellow lines in the middle that sometimes parted for beautifully manicured islands of grass and trees. Much of the highways seemed like a beautiful park. I was also astonished by all the overpasses and underpasses and complicated roads that seemed like something out of the novels of H. G. Wells. I hadn't moved geographically from one place to another, I had moved in time from the past to the future. And these incredible roads were full of large colorful cars, not at all like the little black car we left in the garage in Budapest. The first letter I would write to my friend Edda was all about these roads.

I could observe it all because there was not much conversation in the car. Everyone was exhausted and bewildered. Occasionally my cousin asked the group if they wanted to stop at Howard Johnson's where they had twenty-seven flavors of ice cream, but we all said "no" politely, because in Hungary people don't eat ice cream in the winter for fear of getting a sore throat. We thought cousin Gabor, or perhaps America, was demented. This difference in customs was to be the very tip of the iceberg.

We arrived in Woods Hole the week of Christmas. The Szent-Györgyi's had a large white wooden house with many rooms. Surprise number two – wooden houses. We were used to brick or concrete. They had the first television I ever saw and I was surprised by the advertising which seemed unnatural to me. Aunt Marta took us shopping for American style clothes. She told us to practice smiling because in America everybody smiles. We practiced smiling in front of mirrors. People came to the house caroling. They were followed by reporters heralding our arrival in the local newspapers; these were followed by photographers recording the arrival of refugees in pictures. In the most ambitious one of them all, my father and I stand in the center radiating cheer and optimism. I am wearing my new Sunday best blouse and skirt (I now had six more blouses for everyday wear), my sister wears Marta's Fair Isle sweater but with her pigtails she looks like an exotic country girl. Babszi seems straight from the kitchen already with apron and potholder, her father looking equally at home in a bathrobe. My mother on the far left

looks ill and exhausted with circles under her eyes. Everybody is trying to give a little smile.

Marta was an organizational genius. With a family friend named Clara Mayer who was influential, she arranged that Kristina and I should go to boarding schools and found fellowships for me at the Cambridge School of Weston where her daughter Orsi had gone and for Kristina at the Windsor Mountain School. By January when the Spring semester began, we and our new blouses were taken to those schools. She also suggested that my parents go to New York where the architectural firms were and arranged for a contact with the firm of Harrison and Abramowitz. She thought such separations were necessary so we could learn English quickly and find ourselves appropriate places in the American world. After we had been thus established, what with geographic distance, subsequent closeness with Marta and her family was a rare occasion and not an everyday reality as my father had imagined. The family wasn't really united in the US. That was true with us, too. Except for vacation, after Woods Hole, our family never lived all together again.

1

Self-Made Man

"There are no old jokes; to a newborn all jokes are new."

My father was the most capable man I have ever known. He could do everything that required manual dexterity such as fixing things around the house. He could ice-skate elegantly with his hands behind his back. He could row a fishing dinghy on the Danube near his hometown of Baja or row races with the exclusive rowing clubs of Budapest. He learned to ski in the Alps and taught me how to go downhill as well as uphill in the absence of a lift (which I hated). He danced with a natural rhythm and I learned the Viennese waltz and the Continental tango from him. In his wild youth, which was a legend, he raced cars with a friend in Switzerland, Bruno Walter. My sister still has the trophy, a silver tray whose design traces their route on a winning trip. He could also dismember half a pig in the Budapest bathtub, cutting up chops and ribs and filling casings with spicy sausage meat for the larder. His bedtime stories for me came from physics and astronomy. I remember one in particular that I now know as the Big Bang Theory of the origin of the universe. He claimed to be able to play the flute, although he didn't have a flute in my childhood and I never heard him play, but I never doubted it. He mainly liked modern music which to him meant Wagner. He liked everything modern in clothes, architecture, furnishings.

And yet in many ways he was a nineteenth century person in his values and customs. He kissed ladies on the hand even in America. He told stories of how he had even fought a duel in his youth. The provocation was apparently trivial. He was challenged by an aristocratic party and could not say no except by humiliating himself. Having no experience dueling, he went to a weapons expert who recommended the broadsword as the easiest weapon and gave him a few lessons. His advice was "keep hitting the guy on the head." There was no serious consequence to this duel; the amazing thing is that it was fought at all in the early twentieth century.