



G R A I N E Y P I C T U R E S

But most of those for whom a sports career was paramount had not defected, and eight on the Freedom Tour shortly went back to Hungary. When they arrived, “the only thing people kept asking was, Why the hell did you come back?” said runner Istvan Roszavolgyi, who returned directly from Melbourne. (He died in January 2012.)

The truth, however, is that Hungarians enjoyed relatively more liberties under the so-called Goulash Communism of the 1960s and '70s, when their country was allowed to become what was described as “the merriest barracks in the prison camp,” because Moscow feared more unrest. That’s one reason defectors’ relatives back home suffered few reprisals. Another is the sheer number of people, athletes or not, who fled. “Take 250,000 and multiply it by three or four or five relatives who stayed behind,” Takach explained, “and it would have been impractical to persecute them all.”

Soon after Ordogh Zimsen’s defection, her mother was summoned to the sports ministry to provide an explanation. Ilona Ordogh went on the offensive: “Yes, and where is my daughter? I put her in your care, and you didn’t bring her back to me!” The bureaucrats didn’t have much of a response.

Once defectors earned U.S. citizenship, they could go back to visit their families, for the Hungarian government honored the passports of U.S. tourists. Meanwhile aging parents often received permission to visit the U.S., and several permanently joined their children. “Once you reached retirement age, you just sucked up a pension,” explained Zador, who brought his parents over in the late '50s. After several months of complaining about laid-back attitudes and disrespectful children, they returned to Budapest. Within days—“after dealing again with no hot water,” their son says, “and lugging blocks of ice to the refrigerator on the fourth floor”—they begged him to take them back, promising never to complain again. They spent the rest of their lives in California.

In 2006 the makers of *Freedom’s Fury* arranged a water polo reunion in Budapest for eight Hungarians and four of the vanquished Soviets. Outwardly, bonhomie prevailed. “They were pawns just like we were,” Zador said of the Soviets. But Zador detected a chill from Karpati and Jeney, his teammates who left the tour early. “Karpati and I had been very close,” he says. “Same with Jeney. I’d have loved for them

to say, ‘Come, see my home, see how I live.’ I wanted to find out what it’d been like in Hungary. They came to all the scheduled events, but then they’d leave.”

But most of those who returned to live out politically ambiguous lives in Hungary carried the spirit of '56 with them. Before leaving Melbourne, Jeney took the pre-Communist flag with the black mourning stripe that had flown over the Hungarians’ compound and hid it in the casing of one of the team’s canoes. He squirreled it away in his home for more than 30 years. Today the flag is on display at a Budapest primary school.

After the reunion, Zador and Martin rented a car and spent 10 days vagabonding incognito through the countryside. “We were just American tourists, talking to people in English, paying in dollars,” Zador said. “We didn’t tell anyone we were Hungarian, and people freely expressed their opinions.

“When I left, there were maybe 10 cars in Hungary. Now Budapest was wall-to-wall cars, graffiti, buildings turned gray from pollution. People didn’t seem happy. There’s always been someone pounding on that country. They’re survivors.”

Hungarian émigrés are survivors too. Why have so many prospered in strange and daunting environments, as if, in the words of journalist Kati Marton, they carry “magic in their pockets”? Another émigré writer, Arthur Koestler, suggests an answer in Hungarians’ linguistic and ethnic apartness from other Europeans: “a hopeless solitude” that “feeds their creativity, their desire for achieving.”

“Hungarians are romantic,” Schmid Shapiro says, “or we never would have gone up against the big Russians.”

Hungarian journalist Dezso Dobor, who spent years debriefing '56ers for a 2006 book and TV special called *It Began As an Olympics*, says their defection “wasn’t so much a political choice as the attraction of the unknown. America was seen as a paradise, where the fences around houses were made of sausages and chocolate. The ones who stayed were smart and talented. They made it work.”

Made it work with work, in fact. Karpati and Jeney “realized they’d have to work here, where in Hungary they had all the benefits of the state,” Gerlach says. “They discovered that here, gold doesn’t grow on trees. Whereas we said, ‘Right, it doesn’t. You’ve got to go earn it.’”

Lend me a hammer, please, indeed. □

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