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So We Ran...

Sara R. Bias
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

This paper tells the true story of a Hungarian refugee who's family fled the communist regime there in 1971. Gabriella Bercze's story reflects on what it was like to live in Hungary under communist rule, and her family's experience in escaping the country, and fleeing to Italy, where they lived in a refugee camp for months before immigrating to the United States in the early 70s.

Keywords

Hungary, Refugees, Refugee Camps, Communism, Hungarian Worker's Party, Democracy, Soviet Union

Disciplines

Defense and Security Studies | Eastern European Studies | Ethnic Studies | European History | History | Immigration Law | International and Area Studies | International Humanitarian Law | International Relations | Military History | Peace and Conflict Studies | Political History | Social History | Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies | United States History

Comments

This paper was written for the *International Refugee Law* course at the Danish Institute as part of the study abroad program.

Sara R. Bias
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So We Ran...

“The problem was that the Soviet Bloc countries in the 60s and early 70s were in fact large prison camps disguised as ‘People’s Republics.’ Like in any prison, inmates of the Block couldn’t leave at will.” (Foia)

Gabriella Bercze, now Gabriella Carmagnola, and her family were some of those inmates, imprisoned by the Communist rule in their home country of Hungary.

After World War II, the relationship between the Soviet Union and Western world collapsed, which marked “the beginning of the end for Hungary’s democratic coalition government.” (Burant) At this time, the West was stuck watching communist invasions of Poland, Romania, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia and decided it would intervene to play its part in containing Soviet power, hence the beginning of the Cold War.

By October of 1947, “noncommunist political figures were told to cooperate with a new coalition government or leave the country.” (Burant) Soon thereafter, in the spring of 1948, the Social Democratic Party and the Hungarian Communist Party came together to form the Hungarian Worker’s Party. In 1949, the party held a “single list” election, which passed a Soviet-style constitution, and Hungary was officially renamed the Hungarian People’s Republic. (Burant) By the end of 1949, Hungary’s economy had been reorganized according to the constitution the Hungarian Worker’s Party had ratified, and the country became a workers’ and peasants’ state.

In 1956, an uprising occurred nationwide, where protesters mandated the removal of Soviet troops from Hungary. During this revolution, Imre Nagy, one of the uprising's leaders, was named Prime Minister and immediately imposed a more liberal regime in Hungary. This "soft" communism included Nagy's announcement of plans for Hungary to pullout from the Warsaw Pact and become a neutral power. This of course, was against all Soviet policy, and Nagy was soon abducted by Soviet agents at his place of refuge in the Yugoslav embassy. (BBC) From here, Janos Kadar, a Hungarian communist and former Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Worker's party, took power of the government. Throughout the 60s and 70s, he conducted some liberal reforms to free political and religious prisoners, and various farmers were given increased rights. However, this wasn't done at once; many workers and farmers suffered the consequences of Communist rule right up until Kadar's retirement in 1988.

Antal Bercze, an electrician, was one of those workers. Gabriella explains the struggle her father went through in trying to obtain the necessary compensation he deserved for his work, under the Communist system,

“My dad was educated and believed in democracy. He wasn't going to follow their law, and because of that, he wasn't moving up in the system or getting the promotions he deserved. His promotions were always hinged on communism, meaning they tried to get him to sign papers saying he was a communist in order to be promoted.”

On May 17, 1971, Antal and his wife, Gabriella's mom, Maria Bercze decided it was time to go. This decision this wasn't as simple as fleeing to seek asylum a train ride away, and I'm sure months and months of discussion and route planning were considered in their decision to flee. The journey their family took, with two young children, from here on out, is inspiring.

The Bercze's arrived by train to Zegrab, Yugoslavia¹ and stayed in a seaside resort there

¹ Formerly Yugoslavia, now Slovenia and Croatia.

for a week. The following Sunday, Gabriella's mother explained to her (age 6) and her brother blank (age 9) that they would be taking a Sunday walk that morning, "but when we tell you to run, just run with us.... So we ran." She admits she was too young to ask questions, and followed her parent's lead. Gabriella explains her memories of crossing the border into Italy, as a 6 year old fleeing the only life she knew,

"The crossing point was about a hundred yards and my parents said run.... so we all just starting running down the road to get to the other side of the check point. When the guards heard the commotion from the Italian side, (the Italian guards realized what we were doing and started to run towards us to help) the Yugoslavian guards came out of their barracks and starting running after us."

Perhaps it was a strike of luck that allowed them to cross the border without any immediate threat, and especially that the Yugoslavian guards were at "siesta" while they crossed, but I believe it just showcases the precise planning that Antal and Maria must have put into their escape. The Berczes crossed into Gorizia Nova, Italy, a unique town that at the time was quite literally split in half by the Italian/Yugoslavian border. Gabriella notes, "The people that lived in the town would go back and forth anyway, from work to home, so it wasn't a hypersensitive spot for political refugees to be crossing. Very rural, remote and obscure." Her father was detained for interrogation at the border for hours she remembers, while she, her brother and her mother, waited in the lobby looking at birds in a cage. The colorful and specific details that Gabriella reminiscences, though she was so young, add another level of emotion to her story of being a child refugee.

Her family was sent from Gorizia Nova to the Trieste Refugee Camp², which would be their home for the next four months. I took a moment to stop and visualize what it must have been like to walk up to a refugee camp as a six year old girl. Tall fences? Armed guards? Gravel

² Trieste was at the time a part of northern Italy, but today part of the area was given to Slovenia.

paths? Outhouses? How did Antal and Maria explain this to Gabriella? Her answer was simple, “to be honest, it was almost like I was on vacation, my parents made it an adventure. As bad as the situation was [leaving home], it was going to be better considering where we came from.”

It even gave me some relief to hear her speak of her stay at the camp in such a positive light. She described the camp to me as a community, “the few that did leave like us made it to this camp, and the Hungarians stuck together.” These groups of refugees from the same country within Trieste created a home away from home, for the children and especially the adults. Gabriella remarked that some of her parents’ best friends, to this day, are other Hungarian refugees that they met at Trieste. Gabriella recalls low-rise buildings, open gates and even a cantina where you could buy lemonade. “It wasn’t what you see today, it wasn’t barbed wire, there weren’t overcrowdings,” she said, “Yes there was communal everything- toilets, showers, and a dining hall for everyone, but it wasn’t unlivable.” Better yet, The Red Cross created a child friendly atmosphere that Gabriella remembers vividly; “it was summer so there wasn’t any school. They had activities set up for us at the camp, and we even got to go to a sleep away camp with other kids from Trieste. It was fun for my brother and I,” she continued, “personally I loved Italy and have very good memories from our time there.”

I wondered, why would the Berczes choose the States if it would take so long for them to emigrate under The Immigration Act of 1965? The new act differed from old US quota laws, in the sense that it gave credit to immigrant’s education and careers, and put a quota on any one country of 20,000 people, not different numbers for specific nations. At a time when the Soviet Bloc was trying to keep its last grips on Eastern Europe, there were thousands of refugees from Hungary, Romania and Russia slowing down the Bercze’s move to the US. But it didn’t make a difference to Antal and Maria, “they knew they wanted to come to the States, it didn’t matter

how long it took them. That's what they signed up for."

When the Berczes reached the end of their stay at Trieste, they were moved to a camp in Capua, Italy, closer to Rome where the international airport was. Of course Gabriella's refugee experience didn't conclude at the Italian airport on the way to the States. In fact, she says it was harder to adjust to the states than it was to the camp.

The Red Cross paid for the family to stay a month at the Walcott Hotel in Manhattan, until her father was able to find a job, in which he would pay the Red Cross back right away for their support. They then moved to Brooklyn where Gabriella and her brother, Antal Jr. were enrolled in school right away. Gabriella recalls being a "mute" during her first few months at school; she was the only student who didn't speak English, other than her brother. The courage it must have taken to learn a new language, make new friends and absorb a new country all at the age of six speaks for itself.

Looking back on her journey, 43 years after she lived it, Gabriella drew on the differences between life as a refugee then and now. "Back in the 70s, immigrants were trickling out of Europe," compared to today, when millions of refugees are hoping to even make it to Europe, risking their lives for asylum. She hopes that in the future, refugee law will evolve to be able to hold refugees more accountable for their actions in their new country, and that policy will perhaps be more capable of preventing immigrants from bringing any radical ideas they previously had with them into the US. In addition, she hopes that there will be a movement to help refugees become constructive citizens, in the sense that if they are not educated or entry level trained when they get here, that maybe there can be more opportunities for them to learn and eventually integrate into the market like her father quickly did in 1971.

I met Gabriella, and her husband Domenick Carmagnola, through my Dad, who was designing a house in our neighborhood for them. It wasn't until seven years after I had met her that she shared her story with me. I have to be honest; I thought she was an Italian the whole time! She was born in Dunaujvaros, Hungary, a city about 45 minutes south of Budapest, a city right on the Danube. Gabriella, now 50, attended Oswego State University of New York and majored in Marketing, with a minor in Economics. She is the mother of two wonderful boys, Christopher and Michael who I have had the pleasure of watching grow up down the street.