

# 100 Kilometers to Freedom: Women's Stories of Escape During the 1956 Hungarian Revolution

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"100 Kilometers to Freedom: Women's Stories of Escape During the 1956 Hungarian Revolution" looks at the way people fled Hungary after the uprising against the Soviet rulers, specifically through the lens of Hungarian women. The paper follows the process of escape through resettlement and analyzes the various ways people escaped and resettled. The paper seeks to argue that, though escape routes and methods were wildly varied and resettlement went differently for everyone, those fleeing were often motivated to do so for political reasons. Data to prove this thesis was collected from several primary sources. The most heavily consulted source was a book of oral histories called *56 Stories: Personal Recollections of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, A Hungarian American Perspective*. Many of the women in the book discussed in detail how their families escaped and how they went on to resettle in their new countries, making it an ideal source to prove the thesis. Another source was James A. Michner's book *The Bridge at Andau*; the titular chapter describes Michner's own experiences waiting at the Austrian border to welcome refugees from Hungary. The paper seeks to expand the base of knowledge in the United States about the Hungarian Revolution; there is a dearth of work in this country on the revolution. The paper also seeks to work as a lesson from the past. By studying refugee cases such as the one that resulted from the Hungarian Revolution, people can learn to better handle future and current refugee problems.

The Hungarian Revolution was one of the first big uprisings against Soviet Russia. Inspired by the Polish uprising not but a few months prior, the Hungarian revolution "ultimately threatened the very existence of the Communist party."<sup>1</sup> At its start on October 23, 1956, people were hopeful that a free, democratic Hungary was on the horizon.<sup>2</sup> Within days, Soviet troops had withdrawn from the capital city of Budapest and Imre Nagy, people's choice for prime minister, began plans to withdraw from the Warsaw Pact and began setting up a new government.<sup>3</sup> As fate would have it, though, founding democratic Hungary was not allowed to survive. On October 29, 1956, the Suez Canal Crisis began, a crisis which the Soviets had stakes in.<sup>4</sup> Realizing they were going to lose in the Suez Canal Crisis, the Soviets turned their tanks around and returned on November 4, 1956 to Budapest to crush the revolution.<sup>5</sup> As the revolution began to turn south,

people were faced with a decision: stay or leave? Many people took advantage of the revolutionary turmoil to escape, but just as many Hungarians remained in the country, unsure of what to do, as stricter border controls were raised.<sup>6</sup> Hundreds of Hungarians still looked to the West, though, with thoughts of freedom. Staying in the Soviet held country was detrimental for many reasons. Those hundreds of Hungarians who participated in the revolution or were part of opposition parties faced imprisonment<sup>7</sup> or death should they stay.<sup>8</sup> For others, non-communist political leanings limited education and job opportunities.<sup>9</sup> It was do or die, so thousands of Hungarians piled onto trains with falsified papers speaking of residencies in the border towns,<sup>10</sup> hide in tarp covered truck beds,<sup>11</sup>

1. J. Robert Wegs and Robert Ladrech. "The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the 1950s and 1960s" In *Europe Since 1945: A Concise History*, 121-139. (New York City, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996). 128.

2. *Ibid.*, 130.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Andrea Lauer Rice and Edith K. Lauer, ed. "History of Timeline" In *56 Stories: Personal Recollections of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, A Hungarian American Perspective*. (Budapest, Hungary: Kortárs Kiadó, 1996). 206-208.

5. "Timeline: Hungarian Revolution," BCC News, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5379586.stm>

6. Martha and Kathy Takács, "Memories of Two Sisters Fleeing Their Homeland," from *56 Stories: Personal Recollections of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, A Hungarian American Perspective*, 164.

7. Lily Elizabeth Farkas nee Tersztyánszky, "Released on Amnesty" from *56 Stories: Personal Recollections of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, A Hungarian American Perspective*, 19.

8. Ilona Éva Ibrányi Kiss, "For Me The Revolution Started in 1955," from *56 Stories: Personal Recollections of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, A Hungarian American Perspective*, 69.

9. Edith Lauer, "1956: When the Impossible Seemed Possible," from *56 Stories: Personal Recollections of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, A Hungarian American Perspective*, 91.

10. Takács, "Memories" 163.

11. Helen Szablya, "One Family's Escape to Freedom" from

and trekked miles through marsh lands to reach freedom.<sup>12</sup> Escape was dangerous and not a certainty, though it was possible, and, more often than not, these escapes, varied as they were in method, were often politically motivated and led to the Austrian capital of Vienna just over the Austro-Hungarian border. From there, the world was open to a Hungarian and many refugees made the most of their relocated lives.

To explore the story of escape and resettlement following the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, I have chosen, primarily, stories of women from a collection of oral histories from Hungarian refugees called *56 Stories*. One reason to focus on women's stories is due to the lack of female voices in the tellings of the Hungarian revolution; this can be attributed to the focus on the actual fighting of the revolution, which was primarily led by men. Another reason is because women are often the ones who recount escaping. While men's stories in the book focus on the fighting that the women were more often not involved in, women explain the ways in which their families escaped, the pains they undertook to cross the border into Austria or the former Yugoslavia, and often times go on to explain their life after resettlement, making them the perfect primary source for telling the stories of escape during and following the Hungarian Revolution.

There were many reasons to leave Hungary, many of which boiled down to the politics. Being involved with the wrong political party, or having family members involved with the wrong party, let alone involved in the revolution itself, shut many doors, if not ended lives, of many Hungarians who remained under Soviet control.<sup>13</sup> People with such connection were put under surveillance by the ÁVO [in English: "the State Defense Authority"],<sup>14</sup> Hungary's secret police.<sup>15</sup> Such was the case for Ilona Kiss and her husband Sandor. Due to his political status as a member of the Small Holders Party, a political party in Hungary that was created to represent the farmers,<sup>16</sup> the ÁVO were

looking for Sandor.<sup>17</sup> It was advised that he "disappear right away" which led the Kiss' to their escape. Martha and Kathy Takács had a similar situation as their "father's name was on a list of sympathizers."<sup>18</sup> Finding this out ultimately "forced [their] parents to find a way to leave the country."<sup>19</sup> Various fates awaited those who were targeted by the ÁVO. Some, like Sandor Kiss and Mr. Takács faced arrest<sup>20</sup> and possibly death<sup>21</sup> if they remained in Hungary. Others' fates were not so fatal. Under communism, life was lived strictly, and if one deviated from the assigned plan, opportunities for that person, their spouse, and their children could be hindered by the government and the ÁVO.<sup>22</sup> Edith Lauer, a child during the revolution, recalls her parents making the decision to leave for many reasons, one being the ability to "provide a chance for higher education for [her] sister and [herself],"<sup>23</sup> Higher education was unreachable to her and her sister due to being "politically undesirable elements."<sup>24</sup> Whatever the reason, escape was on the horizon for thousands of Hungarians, and there were various methods and routes which people chose to flee.

"It was easier for Hungarians to go to the moon than to Vienna, a hundred kilometers away" recalls Ilona Kiss.<sup>25</sup> Austria, specifically the capital city Vienna which lay close to the Austro-Hungarian border, was the destination for many of the escaping Hungarians.<sup>26</sup> Another common location was the former Yugoslavia.<sup>27</sup> Yugoslavia was slightly easier to get to due to it also being in the Soviet Bloc, but neither was an easy journey, and the longer people waited, the harder escape got. In the early months of 1957, "travel outside of Budapest was limited to the city of Győr,"<sup>28</sup> a city that was halfway between Budapest and Vienna.<sup>29</sup> The only way anyone could get past Győr was if they lived in the outlying towns or cities.<sup>30</sup> So, people began falsifying documents.

17. Kiss, "For," 69.

18. Takács, "Memories" 163.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Kiss, "For," 69.

22. Ibid., 63.

23. Lauer, "1956," 91.

24. Lauer, "1956," 91.

25. Kiss, "For," 64.

26. "Resettlement of Hungarians: from Austria and Yugoslavia, October 1956-June 1959." In *Refugees: Where are they Now?*, edited by Rupert Colville, (N.A., N.A., 10-11.) <http://www.unhcr.org/4523cb392.pdf> 10.

27. "Resettlement," 10.

28. Takács, "Memories," 163.

29. Rice and Lauer, ed. "Glossary," 209.

30. Takács, "Memories," 163.

*56 Stories: Personal Recollections of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, A Hungarian American Perspective*, 150.

12. James A. Michener. "The Bridge at Andau" In *The Bridge at Andau*, 155-188. (New York City, New York: The Dial Press, 1957) 158.

13. Lauer, "1956" 2.

14. Andrea Lauer Rice and Edith K. Lauer, ed. "Glossary," In *56 Stories: Personal Recollections of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, A Hungarian American Perspective*. (Budapest, Hungary: Kortárs Kiadó, 1996). 209.

15. Kiss, "For," 69.

16. "Ferenc Nagy," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed September 11, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ferenc-Nagy#ref144220>

Martha and Kathy Takács remember their parents having “documents indicating [they] had been residents of Szombathely (a city much closer to the Austro-Hungarian border) since 1953.”<sup>31</sup> Under pretense of their annual ski trip, the Takács’ left by train for Szombathely.<sup>32</sup> Though they faced complications in their first attempt, their second attempt through a different city worked, allowing them to hike out of Hungary through the marshes and forests on the Austro-Hungarian border.<sup>33</sup> Others shared a similar escape path via train and through small border towns, such as Lily Farkas<sup>34</sup> and the Szablyas.<sup>35</sup> Other people were more creative in their escape, such as Olga Szokolay who disguised herself as a piece of luggage on a mini bus.<sup>36</sup> Edith Lauer and her father were able to simply drive out of the country in a “‘borrowed’ taxi cab.”<sup>37</sup> The most common escape method, though, was by foot, and this was illustrated by the flood of people who crossed the famous bridge at Andau.

“There was a bridge at Andau, and if a Hungarian could reach that bridge, he was nearly free,” opens one of the final chapters in James A. Michener’s book on the Hungarian Revolution.<sup>38</sup> There were, of course, many sections of the border crossed by escaping Hungarians, but the bridge at Andau was the most famous as “many thousands of refugees” crossed over it and into Austria.<sup>39</sup> Andau saw entire student bodies with teachers and families in tow, “the finest ballerina of the Budapest opera [...] with several of her assistants,” football players, orchestras, artists, engineers, writers, and so much more escape across the border into the West.<sup>40</sup> The bridge was eventually destroyed by the communists, leaving the only way for escape through the canal the bridge had once spanned.<sup>41</sup> The flow of escapees slowed to a trickle due to this so a group of Austrian students took it upon themselves to sneak into Hungarian territory and construct a crude bridge in the former bridge’s place.<sup>42</sup> This allowed the large flood of

Hungarians to continue coming into Austria.<sup>43</sup>

Escapes varied once more in the amount of people that traveled together. Often times families would escape in smaller groups instead of as a unit, such as what happened with Ilona Kiss. Originally, the plan was to escape as a unit with their family friends the Horváth’s and Kiss’ brother.<sup>44</sup> After her sister-in-law’s decision to stay back in Hungary to escape at a later time, though, Ilona also decided to stay back with her two children.<sup>45</sup> Later, she escaped with her two young children and rejoined her husband in Vienna.<sup>46</sup> Edith Lauer and her family were split as well, with her and her father escaping in late November with her mother and sister following a week later.<sup>47</sup> Other families were able to escape together. The Szabyla’s, a rather large family, were able to escape as a unit, with both parents and three children successfully crossing the border in the end.<sup>48</sup> Martha and Kathy Takács also escaped with their family (two parents, two children) as a unit.<sup>49</sup> Others escaped with even more than just their families. As mentioned earlier, the original plan for the Kiss family was to escape as a unit along with another family, the Horváth’s.<sup>50</sup> Lily Farkas had a similar circumstance in escape mates as she escaped with her brother in law, her brother in law’s wife, her husband, and a former prison mate of her husband’s.<sup>51</sup> Escape with more people was often more difficult, but separation from loved ones, especially when it meant leaving loved ones behind in a revolution torn country, was often more difficult than escape with large families seemed. More often than not, though, families that escaped separately were reunited upon arrival in Vienna.

Escaping with children also made the crossing more difficult. Many children were given directions by their parents to keep quiet and most, even young Helen Szablya at age four, followed instructions well. Helen Szablya remembers being “told not to say a word” as her family made their escape and fearing that she “would fall out [of the truck] where the canvas was not tied down [and] [b]ecause [she] was not allowed to say anything, no one would know [she] had fallen and [she] would be left

31. Takács, “Memories,” 163.

32. *Ibid.*, 163.

33. *Ibid.*, 163-165.

34. Farkas, “Released” 19.

35. Szablya, “One” 152.

36. Olga Vallay Szokolay, “My October,” from *56 Stories: Personal Recollections of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, A Hungarian American Perspective*, 161.

37. Lauer, “1956” 91.

38. Michener. “The,” 155.

39. *Ibid.*, 155.

40. *Ibid.*, 159-160.

41. *Ibid.*, 176.

42. *Ibid.*, 177.

43. *Ibid.*

44. Kiss, “For,” 69.

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.*, 70-71.

47. Lauer, “1956,” 91.

48. Szablya, “The,” 154.

49. Takács, “Memories,” 165.

50. Kiss, “For,” 69.

51. Farkas, “Released” 19.

behind.”<sup>52</sup> Other children, often those too young to control themselves, had to be silenced through different methods, typically with sleeping pills.<sup>53</sup> Michener recalls in his book *The Bridge at Andau*:

the doctors of amazing courage [who] passed among the would-be refugees and gave each mother some sedative pills for her children, so that they would be asleep during the critical attempt to pass Soviet guards, lest an unexpected wailing betray the whole convoy.<sup>54</sup>

Without these doctors and sleeping pills, many groups of refugees could have been betrayed in one of the most dangerous moments of escape by a child’s cry, landing the entire group in jail or worse.

Of the case studies examined in this paper, all told stories of successful escape. Even with this commonality, the stories yet again differ in the ease with which the groups were able to escape. By sheer luck, some had an easier time at fleeing Hungary. Edith Lauer was able to walk across the border with her father with very little resistance.<sup>55</sup> Olga Szokolay was able to escape through her clever disguise as a piece of luggage.<sup>56</sup> Her husband, though, was spotted and detained for a night, but once he was released, his escape was swift.<sup>57</sup> Lily Farkas also had a relatively easy escape, crossing, on foot, the Austro-Hungarian border with a small group of other escapees.<sup>58</sup> Many hundreds of Hungarians who tried to escape, though, were met with resistance.

Successful escape, though achieved by many, was not always easily won. In many of the stories, escapees were met with varying levels of resistance. Many people, such as the Szablya’s, had to attempt “three times before [they] were successful.”<sup>59</sup> Ilona Kiss, though managing to escape the first time through, was met with Hungarian border guards as she tried to cross over into Austria. Barbara Kiss, Kiss’ oldest daughter, remembers “[her] mother [saying], ‘What kind of men are you to kill two children? Have you no heart? Can you let us go?’”<sup>60</sup> which, miraculously, worked; the border guards helped Kiss

and her children across the border.<sup>61</sup> Martha and Kathy Takács also faced struggles as their first escape attempt was foiled when their guide balked at the sight of a soldier filled train station.<sup>62</sup> The Takács also faced challenges due to their late escape. The family finally decided to escape in 1957,<sup>63</sup> several months after the revolution and after months of thousands of other Hungarians fleeing for the borders. Soviets had noted the out pouring of Hungarians and had closed the border and put “tighter controls [...] in place.”<sup>64</sup> The family was eventually able to escape with the help of more reliable guides into Austria and to freedom.<sup>65</sup>

Despite the paper showing only stories of successful escape, this narrative was not true for hundreds of Hungarians. Many were jailed, got lost in the borderlands, or were killed by border guards.<sup>66</sup> Consequences were steep for those who helped people escape. By 1957, when Martha and Kathy Takács were escaping, “if anyone assisted someone else to leave the country, that person received [10 years in prison, without a trial].”<sup>67</sup> Ilona Kiss recalls learning what happened to the man who helped her and her children across the border: he “was abducted by unknown people from a meeting” and was never seen again. Kiss “remember[s] him as one victim of the Revolution.”<sup>68</sup> Escape was not the last hurdle for those lucky enough to flee Soviet held Hungary. Once they made it to Austria or whatever other country they had managed to make it into, there was the question of ‘what next?’ to deal with.

Freedom had been achieved but what to do with it? Many Hungarians, upon arriving in Vienna or the former Yugoslavia, were placed into refugee camps like Wollensdorf Lager or Klosterneuburg Lager, the two camps where Martha and Kathy Takács stayed.<sup>69</sup> Refugee camps were not a permanent settlement, though. Refugees began applying to various embassies such as the United States, Canada, and so on.<sup>70</sup> Families, such as the Lauer’s, who had relatives in these places, were often able to be ‘sponsored’ to relocate there.<sup>71</sup> Without such a connection, though,

52. Szablya, “The,” 154.

53. Michener, “The,” 160.

54. Ibid.

55. Lauer, “1956,” 91.

56. Szokolay, “My,” 161.

57. Szokolay, “My,” 161.

58. Farkas, “Released” 19.

59. Michener, “The,” 160.

60. Barbara Kiss, “Our Escape” from *56 Stories Oral History Project*. <http://www.freedomfighter56.com/index.html>

61. Kiss, “For,” 70.

62. Takács, “Memories,” 163.

63. Ibid.

64. Ibid., 164.

65. Ibid., 164-165.

66. Takács, “Memories,” 165.

67. Ibid., 163.

68. Kiss, “For,” 71.

69. Takács, “Memories,” 165.

70. Ibid., 166.

71. Lauer, “1956,” 92.



immigration to these countries, specifically the United States, became difficult as entrance refugee quotas were quickly overwhelmed.<sup>72</sup> The United States accepted some 40,000 refugees, the most out of any country.<sup>73</sup> Canada and the United Kingdom were the second largest receivers of refugees with the final estimates for Canadian acceptance coming in at 38,000.<sup>74</sup> Several other countries accepted refugees, such as Denmark, the Union of South Africa, Turkey, Argentina, and Australia.<sup>75</sup> Once settled in their new homes, families attempted to resume lives that had been violently disrupted by the revolution.

Life in a new country was difficult at first for some, such as the Takács who resettled in Canada and were for a time separated as the girls were placed in a boarding school while the parents found low level jobs.<sup>76</sup> There was also the difficulty of learning their new country's native tongue. Some refugees, such as the Szablya parents who settled in America, already spoke English, but for others, it was a matter of picking up in the language from the environment around them or through lessons.<sup>77</sup> Once settled in new jobs and languages, though, many people rejoiced in their new-found freedom. Children who could previously not pursue higher education were now able to go to college.<sup>78</sup> Parents whose job opportunities had been limited in Hungary were able to expand their options.<sup>79</sup> Helen Szablya remarks in her story that "the freedom [she] had to pursue the theater for more than 10 years would not have been possible had [her family] stayed in Hungary."<sup>80</sup> Not everything was full of joy, as many people had left behind their homes and cultures and were struggling with how to cope with that.

Cultural preservation was a large part of resettled life for Hungarian refugees. There was a sense among many Hungarian refugees that they had been robbed of their culture and heritage when they had had to flee the communists.<sup>81</sup> So, in their new home countries, Hungarian refugees did their best to preserve their culture. Many families did so by continuing to speak Hungarian in their homes and kept up their former

Hungarian traditions.<sup>82</sup> Others took the keeping of their traditions alive a step farther. Lázár's father, having lost "his career, his prestige, perhaps his dignity, his own family, his history, the city he loved, the Hungarian people and his Hungarian way of life" was unsettled as he started his new life in America with his family.<sup>83</sup> He needed "an outlet for his pent-up Hungarian heritage" and he found that in a radio program.<sup>84</sup> Eventually, he developed his own radio program, the Saturday Evening Hungarian Family Hour, and got his wife to join him.<sup>85</sup> The program allowed him "the opportunity to revisit his beloved Hungary [...] as he wandered in his imagination, taking listeners along the streets of Budapest, [...] playing Hungarian folk [...] music."<sup>86</sup> Many Hungarian refugees also joined and were active participants in local Hungarian cultural groups<sup>87</sup> and other such organizations.<sup>88</sup> Even though they were far from their homeland, Hungarian refugees kept their culture alive.

In the end, nearly 200,000 Hungarians left Hungary.<sup>89</sup> Many more were left behind, trapped behind the Iron Curtain that was raised only a handful of years later in 1961.<sup>90</sup> The 1956 revolution was one of the handful of attempts to push back against Russian communism before it crumbled in 1991. For several days in early November, it looked like Hungary was on the path to freedom,<sup>91</sup> until tanks turned at the border and returned in full force to Budapest.<sup>92</sup> As communism was establishing itself in the country once more, many who had been politically active in the opposition realized escape was their only hope at survival.<sup>93</sup> Others realized that escape was the only hope for their children to have an education, or a job, or success.<sup>94</sup> And so, hundreds of thousands of families, sometimes together and sometimes split, picked up

82. Ibid.

83. Andrea Lázár, "The Szabó Family," from *56 Stories: Personal Recollections of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, A Hungarian American Perspective*, 95.

84. Lázár, "The," 96.

85. Ibid.

86. Ibid., 96.

87. Ibid.

88. Lauer, "1956," 92.

89. Ibid.

90. "Iron Curtain," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed September 11, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Iron-Curtain>

91. "Chapter II: A Brief History of the Hungarian Uprising," in *Report of the Special Committee on the Problem of Hungary*, 18-33. (New York City: United Nations, 1957), 24.

92. Ibid., 25.

93. Kiss, "For," 69.

94. Lauer, "1956," 91.

72. Takács, "Memories," 166.

73. "Resettlement," 10.

74. Ibid.

75. "Resettlement," 10.

76. Takács, "Memories," 166.

77. Szablya, "The," 154.

78. Lauer, "1956," 92.

79. Kiss, "For," 63.

80. Szablya, "The," 155.

81. Szablya, "The," 155.

and left the country with whatever they could carry. There were several paths to freedom, some on foot, some by train, and most under the noses of the ÁVO and Hungarian border patrol. Once freedom was achieved by reaching the relatively near-by Austrian capitol of Vienna or communist held Yugoslavia, families had to decide what to do from there. Hungarian refugees ended up all over the world and established Hungarian cultural communities wherever they landed. And they waited for a free Hungary, to go home, to return to the lives that had been so unceremoniously stripped from them by the Soviets.♦

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