



FREEDOM DANCE

Comments of AHF Vice President Bryan Dawson-Szilagyi at Reception in Support of Freedom Dance: The Movie, an animated documentary film by Craig Fischer and Craig Herron. Norman & Sara Brown Art Gallery, Jewish Community Center of Greater Baltimore, January 22, 2006

Many to this day can hardly fathom how a tiny nation could have the courage to take up arms to defy and fight against one of the most brutal superpowers in world history. To understand 1956, we must first understand the Hungarian People. A nation that spans over one thousand years cannot be understood in a short speech, but I hope to give you a taste of what it means to be a freedom-loving Hungarian. Democracy and the willingness to fight for it, is not a new phenomenon in Hungary...

1222...The Golden Bull of 1222, Hungary's Magna Carta and Hungary's first written Hungarian constitution determined the principle of equality between nobles, election of the King, and occupied a central place in the thought of the Hungarian aristocracy for centuries. It contained a "clause of resistance," whereby if the king failed to keep his word, the nobles were invested with the right to resist and oppose him without charge of disloyalty.

1550... The diet of Torda, in Transylvania, Hungary, granted freedom of worship to the Lutherans with the words: "Every man may hold to his God-given faith, and under no circumstances shall one religion interfere with another. Hungary was the very first place on the earth where freedom of religion was declared and legalized. (Reference: <http://www.hungarian-history.hu/lib/transy/transy08.htm>)

1600... Hungarian nobleman, Capt. John Smith went off to fight the Turks in Hungary. He fought bravely, was captured, sold into slavery in Russia, escaped, and returned to Hungary to receive his coat of arms. The money he would receive allowed him to fund an exhibition where he would meet Pocahontas and make American history.

1779... "The best cavalry the Rebels ever had," said British Brigade Major Skelly in describing Col. Michael Kovats' American Hussar Brigade during the American Revolution. Kovats offered his sword to Benjamin Franklin and died a hero's death at the battle for Charleston, S.C. Immortalized at the Citadel, he is known as a founding father of the US Cavalry. He is the first Hungarian to give his life for American freedom and independence.

1852... "All for the People and All by the People; Nothing About the People Without the People - That is Democracy!" These are the words of Hungarian patriot Louis Kossuth, leader of the 1848 democratic revolution, spoken before the Ohio State Legislature... 11 years before Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

Hungarians have been tied to America inextricably from the start and have always looked to America as a beacon of hope.

1935... Hungary, after being ripped apart after WWI, was in the midst of a depression economically and spiritually. Fittingly, the blockbuster of that year was called “Meseauto,” or “Dream Car.” The story of a young woman, an expert window shopper who was all too aware she could never afford the items she dreamed of owning. A young child actor stole the hearts of millions and represented the future. Like them, Hungarians dreamed of better days; the lighthearted film represented those dreams. But hope was not easy to come by.

1944... The West was unwilling to address growing instability in Europe and Hungarian concerns over its population and territorial losses, thus throwing the now tiny Hungary, caught between the Soviets in the East, and growing power of the Axis in the West, into the Axis sphere. The fiercely independent Hungarians would again resist, angering Hitler who ordered a government takeover in 1944. But as many of you who have Hungarian family know, Hungarians don’t like being told what to do.

Stories of resistance emerged, such as that of Col. Koszorus (the father of AHF’s 1st Vice President), who ordered his First Armored Division into action against pro-Nazi forces in July 1944, preventing the deportation of hundreds of thousands of Jews from Budapest. Congressman Tom Lantos called Koszorus a “Hero of the Hungarian Holocaust” and remarked that this unparalleled action was the only case known in which an Axis power used military force for the purpose of preventing deportations. The action delayed the Nazi takeover for 3.5 months, allowing tens of thousands to escape or find refuge and also permitted Raoul Wallenberg to coordinate his successful and effective rescue mission. But history was again not on Hungary’s side. A few short years later, she was under a brutal, Soviet-installed government. The stage was set for the next Hungarian Freedom Fight!

1956... the brutal oppression of 1950’s communist Hungary exploded into renewed demands for freedom, independence and democracy. Edward Hilbert, that young child star of “Meseauto” who stole so many hearts, now found himself on the side of the students, intellectuals and workers as Hungarians of all walks of life again rose up to rid themselves from foreign control and the misery of communism. They fought desperately for freedom and their 14 points of basic democratic values. This was the first tear in the Iron Curtain.

Hungary looked to America and the West for help, but despite encouragement from Radio Free Europe and the Hungarians’ desperate pleas, help never came. 200,000 would flee Hungary bringing untold talent and skill to the shores of many nations (reference The Hungary Page’s “Nobel Prize Winners and Famous Hungarians” at www.thehungarypage.com). In the midst of the agonies of the revolution and the difficult escape, young Edward Hilbert began his “freedom dance” as he chronicled his experiences in the best way an artist could: in his drawings.

2006 marks 50 years after the triumph of 1956. It is with great pleasure to stand here to reflect on this remarkable film project. I congratulate filmmakers Steven Fischer and Craig Herron for telling Edward Hilbert's story in such a unique way – as unique as Ede bacsí himself. But “Freedom Dance” also tells the story of my mother and every Hungarian Freedom Fighter. For that, I thank you.

1956 brought Hungarians from all walks of life, religions, and from all political persuasions together to fight for a common cause. It is that unifying force we must seek again.

The American Hungarian Federation was founded in 1906 and has been a relentless advocate for freedom and democracy and a watchdog on human rights, but much work remains. Preservation of Hungarian culture here at home, anti-Hungarian violence in the Vojvodina region in northern Serbia, ethnic cleansing, church and synagogue property restitution in Rumania all remain significant challenges to democracy in Central and Eastern Europe.

Thank you all for supporting Freedom Dance. As the son of a 1956 Freedom Fighter, I take it personally. The American Hungarian Federation also invites you to join us as we prepare for the 50th anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution. Our 1956 commemoration committee welcomes your participation. Our children's children need you.

Only in unity can we find strength. May the spirit of 1956 lead us to that unity. Let us dance together for freedom. “Most vágó Soha!”