



Béla Nagypal – Hungarian Freedom Fighter

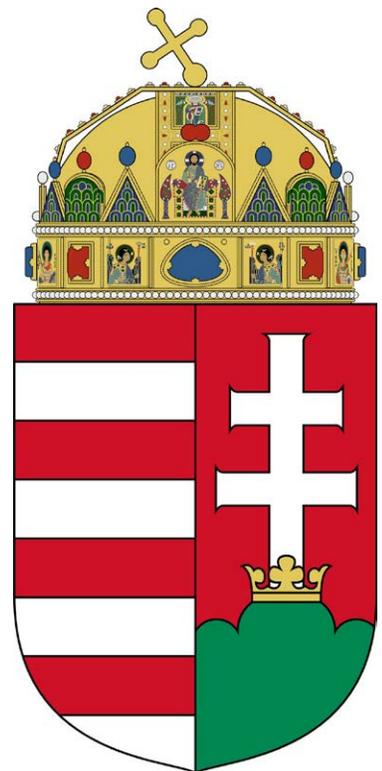
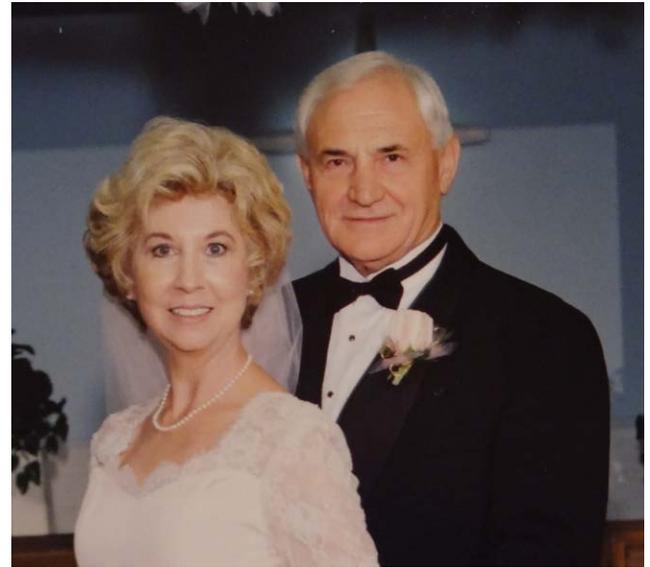
[Tyler County Booster, pt. 1, 03-14-13, 7-8B; pt. 2, 03-28-13, 6B.](#)

Béla Nagypal, pronounced “Bay-la Nodge-paul,” is a name not normally found in East Texas (“g” and “y” are one letter in Hungarian, and a hard “j” or “dg” sound). Though he is proud of his U.S. citizenship, he is also very proud of his Hungarian roots, with a distinctive culture that is over 1,000 years old, 800-plus years older than the U.S. itself.

The path from war-torn Hungary in the 1950s to marrying East Texas hometown widow Mary Fortenberry in Woodville began amid poverty and multiple threats to his life. American children of the 1950s would be called “baby boomers,” and the 1950s-era itself shown on serials like *Howdy Doody* (1947-60) would be idealized in the 1970s with serials like *Happy Days* (1974-84) that characterized the 1950-60s as a refuge of teenagers coming of age with hot rods and surf boards. The hidden side of American poverty and racism had yet to be exposed. A world away Béla and his family struggled to stay alive.

Béla’s son, also named Béla, grew up with his grandmother in Woodville and married Kim Nagypal (district clerk), and they have two children. Béla senior is actually Béla IV, his son Béla V, grandson Béla VI, and great-grandson Béla VII –what a legacy! And so it is important to add that “Béla” is a popular Hungarian name with deep roots.

The era of the Árpáadian kings in Hungary lasted from circa A.D. 972, when Géza was the ruling prince and began to integrate Hungary into Christian Europe, to about 1241 when the Mongol hordes busted things up. Géza’s eldest son, Stephen I, was crowned first King of Hungary in 1000 by Catholic Pope Sylvester II, and Stephen I would be canonized later. Saint Stephen made sweeping reforms, making Latin the official language, though Hungarian was still used and would incorporate the Latin alphabet to replace its old script. His successors extended Hungary’s frontier into Transylvania and Croatia by 1102, just as the first Christian Crusade started out for Jerusalem in 1096; his crown is symbolized on Hungary’s coat of arms today. St. Stephen’s Basilica (finished 1905) is the third-largest building in Hungary today. King Béla III (c. 1148-96) became one of the most powerful and wealthiest kings in Europe as the second and third Christian Crusades unfolded. It has been said he disposed of 23 tons of silver a year, while the French king disposed 17 tons, and the English crown only about 12 tons.



“Béla” has been a respected name in Hungary, like “Rockefeller” in the U.S., only many more Hungarian leaders, reformers, and scholars have been named Béla, and for many centuries.

Moreover, a first American immigrant may have been a fellow named Tryker who travelled with Leif Ericson in 1000. Colonel Michael Kovats founded the first U.S. Calvary and fought in the American Revolution, and Agoston Haraszthy founded the Californian wine industry. Hungarian pioneers include Joseph Pulitzer, father of the hydrogen bomb Edward Teller, father of supersonic flight Theodor von Karman, developer of the radio telescope Zolten Bay, inventor of the holograph Dennis Gabor, and inventor of color television and long-playing records Peter Goldmark. Magician Harry Houdini. The film industry included the Gabor sisters, Tony Curtis, Béla Lugosi, and even film moguls Adoph Zukor and William Fox.

As WWII raged on, the Russians were trying to take Hungary from the Germans.

One day Béla was moseying around in a hay field belonging to a family they were visiting. European hay stacks could be ten to twelve feet high and thirty to forty feet wide.

“I noticed that the hay had been disturbed,” Béla said. Then he heard a noise. The Russians had placed an observer in the hay. “A Russian 85 mm mortar shell came toward me, but its fin caught a fence, tipped over a portion of the fence and landed on its side, not exploding. Another mortar blew a big hole in the roof and another blew a hole in the yard. One exploded 35 feet away. I ran through a clothes line. My mother had helped our relatives do the laundry, and she had put a blanket on the line to dry in the wind. Some shrapnel tore holes through the blanket.”

The Germans knew the Russians were coming. Béla’s family had to leave and get behind the German lines before the Russians arrived. There would be no mercy.

Béla shook his head slightly and glanced down. “One day, we heard a woman screaming. A neighbor lady had given birth; then, after she had her baby, three or four Russians raped her. The Russians took anything of value, all the food, and killed the animals.”

War’s terrible “scorched earth” policy came to Hungary: take all, and leave nothing useful behind.

“Our family broke up. I left for home by myself. I had a long overcoat and a dog. All of a sudden, I heard gunfire! The Russians must have thought I was a German officer. Machine gun fire cracked all around, and then some 170 mm cannon fire landed around me.”

Béla ran for several miles.

“By the time the Russians had quit shooting, I had gotten to a creek line. I heard a Russian plane, at least I had thought it was a Russian plane, then it shot its machine guns at me and the German fortifications.”

Béla was eleven years old. He dove into a house as bullets strafed the ground.

“As I worked my way back home,” Béla said, “I came upon some dead German prisoners of war, without boots and coats, stripped of anything valuable. An airplane was nearby with a Russian pilot waiting for orders. These Russians did not seem to be concerned with me, just a kid, and I just pretended to be normal too. I don’t know what happened to the dog. Hope he made it.”

This was Béla’s homeland and it was hard to discern who the enemy was, who would kill you, and who one could turn to for help. As the Germans lost Hungarian land to the Russians, the Hungarians themselves were shuffled around like outsiders in their own country.

“When I got home, Russian Katusa Rockets had hit the barn, which was attached to the house, with only a firewall separating the barn from the living quarters. The barn had burned down and all the animals in it. The Germans took our Clydesdale-like work horses. It did not look like home anymore. Everything in the yard and all the hay piles, except for our living

quarters – everything had burned to the ground, even our walnut trees. Thankfully, a Polish prisoner who had been working for us and living with us was okay.”

Béla’s home was in the German-controlled town of Zelize in Hungary (Slovakia today). The Russians pushed the Germans farther and farther west, stopping at the Garam River, a tributary that ran into the great Danube River.

The Germans on the west side and Russians on the east side shot at each other with mortars and heavy machine guns for three months. Both the Americans and British bombed the German strongholds they could find.

“During that time, seven German soldiers lived in our house, which had been fortified with sand bags. A machine gun nest was in the back of the house,” Béla said. “We had to live in the bunker while the Germans lived in our house. Two German tanks sat in the front yard under some camouflage. With the soldiers, there were twelve of us. It was smelly and stuffy. We would open the door during the day time, to try to get the air to circulate. The bi-wing reconnaissance planes were called ‘sewing machines’ because of the noise they made. They never saw the tanks.”

Home life? One made the best of it. In spite of a fear from artillery shells or aerial bombs from the sky targeting their home, and tanks therein, at least they did not have to worry about burglars. Local riffraff? – “They were just shot!” Béla said.

“I’d visit with one of regular soldiers manning one of the tanks. SS soldiers also staffed a tank, but the SS were as cocky as hell, real sons of b__s,” said Béla, clinching his teeth a bit. “The regular soldier I had befriended had two children, and one was a boy about my age. One day, as he and I talked, I saw tears in his eyes. I guess I reminded him of his boy, and he, too, feared for his family.”

Béla paused, some of his story still fresh. “As the war progressed, my father was a soldier and got shot. In the Allied-controlled part of Austria near the end of WWII, my father was in a hospital in Austria when the Allies let the hospital prisoners go. He had to walk home, hiding out from the Russians, Czechs, and Slovaks.”

Béla’s father made it back to their home in Zelize as WWII was ending.

The Soviets were particularly brutal to those who fought in WWII, like Béla’s father. As the Slovaks came back into Hungary, they took property away from Hungarians and began to deport Hungarians. The Slovaks loaded up Hungarians with their furniture, food, and belongings into two and half ton trucks and took them to the train station, and many were sent to the Czech Republic.

Not yet a teenager, Béla and his family were shipped by train to Phelzimov, northeast of Prague, capitol of the Czech Republic. Czech farmers met them at the railroad station and selected those they wanted to have work on their farms.

“My father and I talked. It seemed best for me to go back to Hungary, smuggled between two mattresses on a freight car on the train,” Béla said. “But when my mother found about it, she told the authorities on us, so that we would not be broken up.” What a family conflict! His mother and father were divorced, but they still worked together as a family to survive. Who is to know what was best? Father’s idea of smuggling me home? Or mother’s idea of keeping us together?

“We went to a Czech work farm that was privately owned. My family was the cheap labor,” Béla said, with disdain felt to this day. “My father was a carpenter. Many of us helped on the farm, picked potatoes, hauled hay, and normal farm chores. And I couldn’t go to school. We spent about two years on that work farm.”

Béla's family shipped clothes to his father's cousin on the border of Slovakia. They planned to get back to Hungary, somehow, someday. They wanted to get back home! Finally a plan came together.

Imagine, you, as a Texan, being held in Oklahoma, or, worse, Florida! And you and your parents had to devise a way to secretly communicate with your aunts and uncles in Tyler County. Then your family had to devise a way to get you out of the Florida orange groves, past the Florida state police, and smuggled back home to Woodville. So you could finish high school!

"I got on a train by myself," Béla said, "going to Pasto, a border town near the Ipoly River." The river separated Slovakia and Hungary. Béla had no identification, so he told the Czech police he was going a lot farther inside Slovakia, rather than to Pasto, so they might not keep as close an eye upon him when they got to Pasto. They would be watching him. After the train stopped in Pasto, Béla went to the restroom, waited for the train to start going again, and then jumped off. He hid in the bushes.

"I got to our relative's house, and my parents arrived a couple of days later."

"Our families watched the border patrols carefully. Then early in the morning, between patrols, we crossed the river. It was hard to stand up in the river. Once we crossed, the Hungarian border patrol gave us some dry clothes."

Think about that. Crossing the Sabine River, wet and tired, and Texas State Troopers being there to welcome you, give you warm clothes, and protect you.

Béla smiled, "The Hungarian border patrol put us on a train to Budapest free of charge. We were on the way home at last."

In Budapest, Béla and his father walked along the bank of the Danube River, viewing their precious war-torn city with sorrow. All the bridges had been blown up and many of the buildings were in a rubble. Especially tragic for Hungarians, like what the Patriots must have felt when the White House was burned by the British in 1814 after the Battle of Bladensburg over 200 years ago or like we felt when terrorists drove planes into the World Trade Center Towers over 10 years ago. Only there is a twist to the Hungarian pain that is hard for the Americans to apprehend. Beautiful Budapest was over 1,000 years old; indeed, entire books have been written on many of the sentences in this article, and more books could be written still.

The area around Budapest was first settled by Celts, and the Romans took over in the 1st century A.D. After the fall of Rome, the Magyar tribes migrated in 896 A.D. and settled in the area known as Hungary today. "Hungary" comes from the Turkic *On-Ogurs* which means "The People of the 10 Arrows," referring back to the Magyar tribes and their expertise on horse and with bow and arrow, similar to the Turks. Their language united them, for Hungarian is unique, only a distant relative of Finnish and Estonian, non-Indo-European, with 40 letters in the alphabet, 14 of which are vowels. It is so very highly inflected that some nouns can have over 200 variations. Can you imagine "William" or "Chevrolet" having 200 *written* variations? Sure you can. Think about the many ways one can voice "William," as in anger, with a question, in fear, or with disgust, and you will begin to understand that what is voiced can be also be written in Hungarian because it is 99% phonetic. Linguists say it is highly logical and one of the most precise languages on earth, some say the most beautiful.

After the golden age of the Árpáadian kings, the disruption of the Mongol hordes, and other upheavals, the Austro-Hungarian Empire united the crowns of Austria and Hungary for 51 years until their defeat in WWI in 1918, after which the countries were chopped up, resulting in Czech, Ukrainian, Romanian, and Hungarian governments. For the next fifty-plus years, after WWI, the rise of Hitler, WWII, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, and the establishment of the Third

Hungarian Republic in 1986, the Hungarian people themselves never lost their cultural identity, though the actual border shifted like the tide. Yet, they refer to their native Hungarian language as Magyar today, still connecting themselves with tribes of the late 800s.

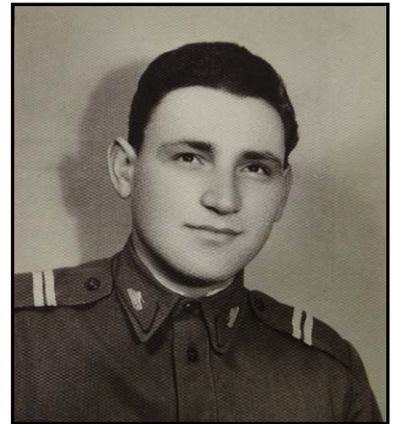
Budapest itself is the combination of two cities, Buda and Pest, straddling the Danube, and was not recognized by the name “Budapest” until 1873. Hungarian culture is famous for its distinctive cuisine. World-famous chef Jeff Smith pointed out what many chefs know well, that the Hungarians “tamed the red pepper to the sweet and lovely thing that we know of as paprika.” Smith warned against visiting the “government-run restaurants,” which seems strange to Americans, for – of all things – food should be a free enterprise. The city of Szeged is famous for its paprika, exporting it worldwide. Among Hungary’s culinary delights are sauerkraut cooked in paprika gravy, pan-fried pork steak, stuffed red bell peppers, stuffed cabbage rolls, and tomato vodka soup, each one with the specified number of teaspoons of Hungarian paprika. Oh – makes one’s mouth water. And Smith warned, “Please do not buy cheap paprika in those little tiny jars.... no flavor whatsoever. Buy good paprika from Szeged” (*The Frugal Gourmet*, 1990).

The Danube River is Europe’s second largest (after the Volga) and flows easterly for 1,782 miles from southern Germany’s Black Forest and to the Black Sea. There are about 100 tributaries, 25 of them being major navigable rivers in their own right. In the later part of 2013, Mary and Béla have planned a trip with Brian and Roxanne Babin, starting in a boat by the Black Sea and travelling up the Danube to Budapest, then rent a van and travel, see the sites, and sample the cuisine.

At the end of WWII in Budapest, Béla and his father walked along the famed Danube with 1,000 years of pivotal history behind them. Their unique cultural heritage was threatened, dependent as they were – at that very moment – upon the exigencies of war and the warlords they could scarcely understand, with a future as uncertain as their own. Walking and wondering where “home” might be in the next few days and weeks.

When WWII ended, communist Russia occupied Hungary.

Béla’s family lived in Békéscsaba. Béla worked for the railroad for a time, reconstructing the bombed-out train stations, and at night he finished High School, finishing two years in one year. Then he entered the 300-year old University of Szeged and graduated with a degree in electrical engineering. After graduating, he moved to Budapest. Shortly, he was drafted into the Hungarian Army Officer’s school in 1949, but he fought that appointment, resulting in his reassignment for two years in an armored unit as a sergeant training snipers and preparing new recruits in heavy artillery.



Once discharged, Béla went back to Budapest to work in his trade of electrical engineering.

PART TWO, Tyler County Booster, 03-28-13, 6B

Béla became a Freedom Fighter in the 1956 Hungarian Revolution.

Béla Nagypal worked for the Budapest Construction Company in old Buda. As they dug new foundations they found all kinds of archaeological treasures, including old graves, Turkish baths, and some Roman money.

On the evening of October 23, 1956, Béla was coming home on a street car. When he and a friend got into the center of the city, they saw students leading a march with many citizens quickly joining them.

By 8 P.M., some estimate about 200,000 citizens had gathered near the Parliament, mostly peaceful. Proclamations were read and the crowd chanted the censored patriotic poem “National Song,” with the refrain, “This we swear, this we swear, that we will no longer be slaves.”

As Béla and his friend walked around, their own affinity with the growing discontent grew. Most of the students were from the University of Budapest and were joined by the younger generation workers like Béla and his friends.

When the Hungarian Communist First Secretary Ernő Gerő broadcasted to the crowd a condemnation of the writers’ and students’ demands, the crowd’s indignation rose. Someone cut out the communist coat of arms (hammer and sickle) from the Hungarian flag’s center, leaving a distinctive hole in the center; many others did the same throughout Hungary. The Communists did not like that.

At about 9:30 P.M., the 30-foot bronze statue of Stalin was toppled, which had been erected in 1951 over a church demolished to build the statue, and Hungarian flags were put into Stalin’s boots.

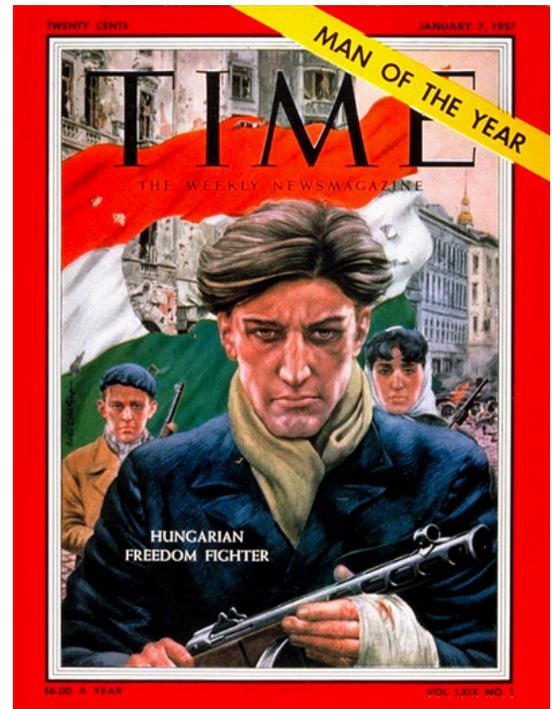
The Radio Budapest building was heavily guarded by the State Protection Authority, known as the ÁVH (Államvédelmi Hatóság), a Hungarian version of the Soviet KGB, for the ÁVH fully supported the communist Hungarian Working People’s Party known as the MDP (Magyar Dolgozók Pártja).

When students entered the Radio Budapest building and tried to broadcast their demands, the students were detained and rumors spread that the students were shot. True or not, the rumor ignited the crowd. Tear gas was thrown from the building into the crowd below and the ÁVH fired into the crowd, killing and wounding many. Hungarian soldiers sent to help restore order, halted, then tore the red stars from their caps and joined their fellow citizens in the protesting crowd.

The Hungarian Revolution had begun that day, October 23rd, 1956, etched in history, and would last less only a couple of weeks, ending on November 10. Top news around the world, its heroes became known as Hungarian Freedom Fighters, and TIME magazine made them the 1956 “Man of the Year” in January 1957! The TIME composite looked a little like Béla, too, though he was not smiling much then.

Many historians believe that night marked the first break in Communism. In downtown Cleveland there is a monument with a Freedom Fighter holding the Hungarian flag with a hole in it. Above Kennedy’s quote on the foundation, there reads, “The crack in the Berlin Wall began with a hole in a flag in Budapest!”

On the first anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution in 1957, then Senator John F. Kennedy said, “October 23, 1956, is a day that will live forever in the annals of free men and nations. It was a day of courage, conscience and triumph. No other day since history began has shown



more clearly the eternal unquenchability of man's desire to be free, whatever the odds against success, whatever the sacrifice required." I do not recollect any two-week foreign revolution as well remembered, especially by U.S. citizens. The fighting spirit of the Hungarians against impossible odds struck a chord in freedom-loving peoples across the world, much as the Battle of Thermopylae did in 490 B.C., where 300 Spartans and a few thousand allies faced down the Persian horde – the odds were about the same in 1956!

As Béla stood against the wall of the Hungarian Inn, one foot lifted against the wall, then – CRACK! – one of the bullets hit the wall and threw dirt into his ear.

"Thirty to forty minutes later," Béla said, "we had to get together. We cannot let them shoot students. About fifty of us ran up into the police station. As we entered, the Hungarian police left; they did not want to shoot their own people. We got into their weapons storage. I got one of the 9mm German rifles, loaded it with ammunition. Then we got into one of the trucks and headed up the Vienna super-highway for the mining town of Tata, to get the miners to join us."

All over Hungary, almost as soon as news of students being shot at ground zero in Budapest was heard, like lightning all over the country, spontaneous militias banded together. The powder keg blew, and the Russians scrambled. Many police stations were overrun. The House of Terror and Dread on 60 Andrassy Street in Budapest was feared by all, containing within its cellars ÁVH torture chambers (now a museum). ÁVH officers were executed, and imprisoned Hungarians were freed by local militias. Improvised "councils" took control of townships. In about a week, it has been estimated that across Hungary about 348 councils had been formed, dismissing local councils; in over 600 communities demonstrators damaged symbols of Soviet authority such as red stars, Stalin or Lenin statues; 393 Soviet war memorials were damaged. Rarely had a revolution sprung up and spread so fast. The Venerable Cardinal József Mindszenty who had been given a life sentence in a show trial by the Soviets and imprisoned was freed in 1956.

"But, we never got to Tada," Béla said. It was very foggy as they crawled along. Béla was in the back of the truck, in the center, looking forward. He knew where they were as he had drilled there in the army.

Béla yelled, "Stop! Stop!" They came to a stop right in front of a Russian T-34 tank.

"I realized that they were KGB, in regular Hungarian army uniforms. They circled around us. Then we saw two more tanks. I had served with the same tank officers in the regular Hungarian army, so I walked over to one of the officers I knew and talked to him."

He told me, "Be careful. These sons of b__s are KGB."

They had to cooperate or die.

"They lined us up, took all our IDs, and moved us into a building. I was at the back of the line. They were calling us all kinds of names: terrorists, traitors, trash. I was a Communist, too, and had the proper ID. If you lived in Hungary during that time and wanted to eat, you were Communist. Had no choice."

"Being last in line," Béla said, "I saw a young soldier with a bayonet on his rifle."

Béla had always been good with people, and he knew all too well where all of this was heading. "I asked the young soldier, 'Where are you from?' He told me and I replied, 'I said I



was from the same district.” Yes, a blood brother. “I quietly asked him about escaping. If I could use the restroom.”

“Wait a minute,” the soldier said. “See this hallway, outside of the window and to the right is a restaurant. I will walk you to bathroom in a minute.” The soldier nodded.

“As we walked down the hall,” continued Béla, “we turned to go to the restroom, and I jumped out the second story window, hitting a portion of the barbed wire fence on the way down, and falling inside the barbed wire. Thanks to the heavy fog and the troops digging in, I knew what to do. I followed the creek back into town. An old couple fed me and allowed me to spend the night.”

“I got a family in Budapest,” the old woman said, “so I shall claim you as my son.”

One hour coming home from work, next armed and facing Russian tanks, and the next day a full-fledged Hungarian Freedom Fighter – it had been a very long couple of days. Home – what did that mean?

“I went back to the apartment where I lived in Budapest,” said Béla, and the Russians had twelve tanks lined up near the square, not far from his apartment. Me and some other guys got some machine guns and positioned ourselves in the basements where we could shoot them.”

They fought as best they could, urban guerrillas, eating what they could scrounge, hoping that from somewhere help would arrive.

The Russians were brutal. One day the Russians shot up a nursery, killing forty babies.

Béla remembers well some of their own brutality to the Russians. “We had a Russian-made T-34 tank that was part of the Hungarian army, and we shelled the building housing some Hungarian KGB officers. We pounded the building until they came out. Then we strung them up, and left them hanging, a few of them eviscerated to instill fear. Very bloody.”

“We threw Molotov cocktails out of second story windows onto the tanks,” Béla said. “We did all we could to disrupt. I do not remember how many I killed.” Those were the most frantic and violent couple of weeks of his life, unsure if he or his country would survive. Béla was not a Communist that week, but one of the Communists’ many nightmares in Hungary.

“A Hungarian officer and I became friends and we decided we had to get out,” said Béla, realizing the end was coming soon. “We snuck out of Budapest to the western railroad station, hiding ourselves from the Russian troops. As the train took off, we jumped on. We told the conductor about our situation and he took care of us.”

The Russian KGB were looking for anyone suspicious.

As the train ran along about 20 mph, and being warned by the conductor, they jumped off the moving train into the snow.

“Thanks for the snow,” Béla grinned.

Near the border, they had to sneak through the woods, stooping down, sometimes crawling beside the highway. They ran into a Hungarian border patrol who told them about the Russian patrols securing the borders. Toward the end of the short revolution, the Russians had secured all the roads in and out of Hungary.

“As we got closer to the border, we could hear the tanks. Flares were shot into the sky to illuminate the area. As we snuck along, we heard something, and looked back to see that some people were following us. Including a young couple with a baby, who had stuffed the baby’s mouth with a cloth to stifle its cries and whimpers.”

Béla and his army friend led the way. “Follow us and do what we do. When you hear the ‘pop’ of a flare gun, drop flat on the ground!” They had to do that several times as they led their

little band through the woods and past the checkpoint. They followed the railroad track that led into Austria.

“We got to a bridge and noticed that some people had tried to cross the lake and drowned in the freezing water. They did not know that the bridge crossed into Austria. We walked across the bridge, and – thankfully – we were met by the Austrian border patrol. They took care of us, taking us to a school and giving us blankets. For me and my friend, it was the first good night’s sleep in a long time.”

The next day was rougher. The Austrian officials were a little heavy handed. They were worried about Hungarian or Russian spies coming into Austria. All were loaded on buses and taken to Salzburg.

The revolution was dying almost as quickly as it had begun, in part because of Russian power and duplicity. The Russians relaxed and pledged to re-establish free elections. A false sense of relief filled the air. The Soviets even announced it would withdraw its forces. Promises, promises. Yet, on November 4, a large Soviet force invaded Hungary, increasing its army divisions from five to seventeen in a few days. The Russians killed, arrested, and overwhelmed the Hungarian resistance. By November 11, the last of the resistance was crushed. At the end, over 2,500 Hungarians and 700 Soviet troops were killed, and 200,000 Hungarians fled as refugees. By January 1957, all public resistance had ceased.

The revolution was over, but not forgotten!

Many pockets of Hungarians celebrate October 23 and the courage of their Freedom Fighters across the U.S. and in other countries. In a Proclamation on October 20, 1986, President Ronald Reagan said, “The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 was a true revolution of, by and for the people. Its motivations were humanity’s universal longings to live, worship, and work in peace and to determine one’s own destiny. The Hungarian Revolution forever gave the lie to communism’s claim to represent the people, and told the world that brave hearts still exist to challenge injustice.”

For nearly 30 years, no one could even talk about the 1956 revolution in Hungary. But censorship began to relax in 1980s, and with the fall of communism in general and during the inauguration of the Third Hungarian Republic in 1989 “October 23” was declared a national holiday in Hungary, so long overdue!

The American Hungarian Federation (AmericanHungarianFederation.org) is an internet portal for Hungarian American organizations in the U.S. to promote the 1956 revolution commemoration activities. Memorials can be seen in Denver, Erie, Bridgeport, Fairfield, Berkeley Springs, Boston, Los Angeles, New York, Passaic, Akron, Ottawa, North Olmstead, New Orleans, Loraine, Miami, New Brunswick, and Cleveland (see also Magyar.org and AHEA.net).

In Austria, the CIA began to interrogate Béla and his friends.

Béla spoke five languages then: Hungarian, Czech, Polish, Russian, and German; he picked up English after coming to America. He and Mary joke a bit about their respective accents contrasting, his Hungarian and her Southeast Texan – how they love each other.

Béla wanted to go to America. Because of Béla’s fluency in languages, the CIA asked if he wanted to join them. He persisted, and was flown from Vienna to Camp Kilmer, N.J. The interviews continued. After all, he chose Texas.

Yet, before he left for Texas, he was welcomed to the U.S. by another Hungarian in Newark, movie star Zsa Zsa Gabor, who married Conrad Hilton III. He and a few of his friends made the trip to her penthouse at the Hilton in New York.

Béla remembered it well, the ankle-deep carpet and luxury was a bit unnerving.

“She was nice,” Béla said, but just a couple of weeks ago he had been fighting for his life, and that, after a near lifetime of struggle. The splendor was nice, awesome, but a world apart.

They were flown to Dallas and stayed at the White Plaza Hotel for a couple of weeks. Hungarian Julius Madara owned an engineering firm in Longview, and, before long, Madara sent word to the authorities that he would take care of six of the immigrants.

“We received a police escort to the Longview hotel, like we were heroes. I got a job with Garrett Oil Tools, that later became the USA Tool Company.”

He met his first wife while working for Garrett Oil and Tools. Then he went to work for LeTourneau in one of their plants in Longview, while he attended LeTourneau University at night, working on another degree in aeronautical technology. In Longview, his first and only son was born in 1958.

On July 5, 1961, he became a naturalized citizen of the U.S., and to this day is thankful to have been a part of such a pivotal point in the battle for freedom and against communism, though at the time, he and his friends had no clue they would survive, much less that their revolution would be memorialized all over the free world.

Next he worked for Schlitz Brewery and then Kerr Glass. The latter became Kerr Plastics, and he joined their corporate engineers group in California for five years. His last job was helping Kerr Plastics build a plant in Bowling Green, Ky., and he retired in 1998.

Béla jokingly said, “My son was on my tail. Being single and retired, I just had to move to Woodville. I so love my son and grandkids.”

After 34 years of marriage, in 1999, Mary Fortenberry’s husband Thomas died. They had owned Thomas C. Fortenberry Construction Inc.

Béla’s son’s energetic grandmother, Willie Pate, was determined to introduce Mary. She invited Béla over for lunch one day in 2001. But he forgot.

He had an appointment that day with someone building him a lake, and did not think about the lunch until after 3 P.M. Ouch!

“Ms. Pate was really mad,” Béla said, “really took me apart. I was so embarrassed.”

At about 7 P.M. that evening, Béla called Mary, “You don’t know me, but will you go to dinner with me, to get me out of the doghouse with my son’s grandmother?”

Mary chimed in, “We dated every day until we got married on September 22, 2001. He was my special gift from God.”

And, wouldn’t you know it, Béla is quite the cook, and could, if he was inclined, start his own Hungarian restaurant. He grows his own herbs and, of course, has some Hungarian peppers from the homeland growing in his greenhouse. And large cans of paprika from Szeged in their spacious kitchen.

Mary and Béla have been together ever since, have two grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. Mary had a cemetery plot, and when she brought him to see it, Béla shed a tear when he saw the headstone she had specially made for him in the shape of the National Freedom Fighter’s Memorial in Hungary with the coat of arms on the front, inscribed with “Beloved Father, Husband, and Proud American,” and on the back an etching of the Hungarian flag with a hole in it and the year 1956.

From two worlds apart, Béla and Mary are now, at last, both at home in Woodville.

