

## 1956 Commemoration: Brief Remarks

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Magyar Haz, Wallingford, CT

First, let me start by saying “thank you” for allowing me to speak today. To be invited to share some comments with you on a day as important as the commemoration of 1956 is an honor indeed. So, once again, thank you.

Everyone here knows about the events of 1956. We have with us today a number of Hungarians who can share their remarks about what happened at that time. I was not there and it is not my place to tell you all about those days. I am not Hungarian. I’m American. I was just fortunate enough to live in Hungary for enough time to form something of an emotional bond with some very good Hungarians. I am here today as a private citizen and something of an outside observer. So, I thought it would be most useful, and hopefully the most interesting, to share with you a few of my personal thoughts.

I am American, born and raised in the South. I first moved to Hungary in 1994 and, to be honest, knew very little about the country and the region. I had studied the economics of transition and knew some facts and figures, but nothing of substance.

Of course the Hungarians I met there were quick to educate me.

I would *like* to tell you that my first lesson was in Hungarian history, but I don’t think that’s true. In all likelihood, and I’m sure you will all agree, I was first taught about the long list of Hungarian Nobel prize winners and famous scientists: from von Neumann to Teller and down through the list. By the time I left in 1998, I had almost been convinced that all major scientific achievements trace back to Hungary. Almost. I was a little relieved – I have to say – to return to the US. I returned to earn my PhD in Economics, and for me, the world of economics was one place where I thought I could escape the Hungarian scientific legacy. Much to my dismay, I learned that Nobel laureates in Economics like George Stigler and Milton Friedman were part Hungarian. Milton Friedman was born in greater Hungary and spoke some Hungarian as a child. And that’s not even to mention the more recent Nobel award given in Game Theory in 1994 to Harsányi János Károly. So, I admit defeat. I give up.

But the reason I mention this is that Hungarians get a particular gleam in their eyes when they talk about these people. It is good and inspiring to talk to people proud of something.

My Hungarian history lessons were not always so positive. They started off with the Honfoglalás, eventually got to Christendom under St. Istvan, and so on, but took a rougher turn when we got to Mohacs and thereafter.

I actually had serious Hungarians tell me at the time that they thought Hungary wouldn't every *really* be allowed into NATO because the Western powers knew Hungary was always on the losing side and in failed alliances and including them in NATO would somehow jinx NATO causing it's eventual collapse. I left in 1998 and Hungary joined NATO soon after. I am sure if I'd still been there those same people would have told me, yeah, yeah, but *they'll never* let us in to the EU... Hungarians sometimes have something of a gloomy view of their own history.

To me, that's completely opposite of the lesson I took from Hungarian history. My initial reaction and my reaction today is one of respect for a nation of people who persisted in the face of adversity. It is respect for a nation who persistently fought and earned their freedom. And, for me, 1956 is a great example of that.

It was an honor and reaffirmation of that view when I took 9 MBA students to Hungary this summer for 15 days in June. They learned the basics of Hungarian history and heard a lot about 1956 since the stories continually surfaced in the conversations we had and because memorials can now easily be found throughout Budapest from the Nagy Imre bridge and remaining holes near Kossuth ter to the Terror Haz which is surrounded by pictures of freedom fighters who died in battle or in the dark prisons of a horrendous regime. Time and again these students told me how impressed they were by Hungarian history from it's spread of Christianity in the region, defense against the Turks, and rebellion against communist tyranny. They found it often sad but inspirational as I always have.

As an American, I am sorry to say that our role in 1956 was not positive. The world was a mess. I think we sometimes forget what a mess it was. In preparing my comments today, I took a little time to remind myself of the events in 1956. In that same year, Britain, France and Israel had launched

attacks against Egypt in the what has been called the Suez Crisis. The US faced a potential public relations embarrassment of criticizing the Soviet Union's suppression of the 1956 revolutionaries while at the same time avoiding criticism of its two principal European allies' actions. The United States clearly feared a wider war after the Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact governments threatened to intervene on the Egyptian side.

The Eisenhower administration forced a cease-fire on Britain, Israel, and France, something it originally said it would not do. Things got so bad that Portugal and Iceland actually suggested kicking Britain and France out of NATO. The US warned the British that unless they withdrew from Egypt, we would dump all our national stock of British Pounds and Sterling Bonds, making them worthless in world markets. We then worked with Saudi Arabia to start an oil embargo against Britain and France until Britain and France agreed to a rapid withdrawal which they eventually did.

And we think international relations are strained today...

But that is all just to say we, the Americans, dropped the ball and Hungary certainly suffered. That is particularly sad for me because I have long been proud of the US. I generally agree with Ronald Reagan's words that "A troubled and afflicted mankind [often] looks to us, pleading for us to ... uphold the principles of self-reliance, self-discipline, morality, and, above all, responsible liberty for every individual..." That is, to act like that shining city on a hill of which he often spoke.

Well in 1956, we failed to be that shining city, but Hungarian freedom fighters took on that role instead. That is something very worth remembering. It is something about which Hungarians should be proud. It is something that people who value freedom should always keep in mind. To quote President Reagan again "Freedom is a fragile thing and is never more than one generation away from extinction. It is not ours by inheritance; it must be fought for and defended constantly by each generation..." I believe the Hungarians have done their fair share of fighting – even when the US failed to pull it's weight in those battles. 1956 inspired then and now those in the world who love freedom.

That isn't just my view. Let me share some short private stories.

My wife, Emese, and I lived in Texas while I studied at Texas A&M University. If you know anything about Texans in general, and Aggies in particular, they are a proud people. They love their country and their freedom. They felt a kindred spirit with the Hungarians in 1956 as I suspect they do with many freedom fighters around the world to this day. That's just how Texans are.

Well, Emese was at a meeting one day when Mr. Ed Szymczak learned she was Hungarian. He took the chance to tell her about meeting 1956 refugees at A&M when he was a student there in 1957. Just this week I called Ed to ask once again about his experiences.

Ed grew up on a farm, the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation of Polish immigrant farmers in that part of Texas. He went to A&M to study engineering in 1957. He admits that he was 18 and while he knew there were conflicts and problems in the world, like most 18 year olds, he was pretty fuzzy on the details. A&M is a land-grant university and founded on a military tradition of the core of cadets. A&M is very Texan and it's student body even today is very Texan. Ed was proud and certainly excited to attend.

He was able to transfer to A&M in his sophomore year and was assigned a dorm room in Bizzell Hall in the middle of campus. Ed gladly moved into his dorm but was surprised by all the foreigners he found there. There were lots of Chinese, other Asians, and, as he recalls, a number of Iraqis. He settled in and got to know his many neighbors.

One day Ed was at the student housing office and confessed to the worker there that he was surprised to see so many foreign students and asked if there was any special reason. Somewhat taken aback, the office worker said, "Well, to be honest, we saw your name, Szymczak and assumed you were one of the Hungarian refugee students here. We intentionally put you in the foreign student dorms." Ed laughs about it to this day.

It turns out that A&M offered room and education to the Hungarian students seeking refuge after 1956. They established relations with Hungarian universities to recognize credits earned in Hungary and allowed the students to finish their university studies relatively quickly contingent upon taking some courses, passing some exams, and otherwise improving their English skills. A&M was and is an outstanding engineering school – especially in

mechanical engineering – and many of the Hungarians there were engineering students.

Well this links back to the list of Nobel prize winners. The students, as you can all well imagine, were exceptionally good at math and science. Ed says they quickly earned a very good reputation as excellent students and very hard workers, earning the respect of students and professors alike. Of course, they told people about 1956 and the difficulties in Hungary and were very warmly received by everyone. Ed of course got to know several of these students since he was “one of them” living in their dorm.

In his junior or senior year, Ed was taking an upper level engineering theory class on thermodynamics and some other things I don’t think I would understand myself. During roll call, the professor called “Szymczak ! ... Oh, you must be one of the Hungarian students.” Before Ed could respond, another student quickly injected, “yes, yes he is”. They carried on the charade that Ed Szymczak was Hungarian for a while until after enough classroom discussion Ed’s southern accent betrayed his nationality. While the Hungarians learned English well, they still didn’t speak like native Texans raised on the farm.

But these stories tell something deeper. The Hungarians there earned the respect of everyone for exactly the things Hungarians are often respected for: standing up for freedom, hard work, and strong intellects. I might privately add, a certain sense of stubbornness to that list. But perhaps that’s what helps in these other things as well.

The Hungarian students made Ed an honorary Hungarian freedom fighter too. They drew a picture of him in a traditional peasant hat with a feather in it, holding a rifle over one shoulder. On the brim of the hat was written “Hungarian Freedom Fighters” and at the bottom, “Ed Szymczak (1956)”. He framed that picture and he hangs it in his home to this day with great pride. So much so that when Ed was awarded one of A&M’s top awards for research and achievement in the field of mechanical engineering, Ed had that picture displayed with his other diplomas, papers and awards. After talking with me on the phone this Wednesday, he enthusiastically volunteered to carefully remove it from it’s frame, scan it, and email it to me just because I had called to ask about his private experiences with Hungarians from 1956. (attached)

That's the kind of enthusiasm and lifelong respect Hungarians can inspire. That is something you should all be proud of.

Ed then called his friend Bob Schoen who also gladly contacted me to talk about his experiences as well. Bob is Hungarian and was a student at the Muszaki Egyetem in 1956. He modestly states he has no claim to fame in the revolution but did take part in the Nemzet oseg (National Guard) and in the demonstrations. Because of his student involvement he was told that he and his family should leave for their own safety. He escaped with his parents and sister to Austria. They eventually landed in St. Louis, Missouri – a location they chose because they had read Huck Finn by Mark Twain which takes place along the Mississippi River in Missouri. He attended Washington University and graduated in Mechanical Engineering. His story was equally positive about his reception in the US.

It was interesting to me that while the Hungarians were given some breaks, as Bob discussed, they were just to help them get started. They would get some clothes and food, an apartment with no rent for the first few months, and so on. The rest was up to them. I believe this fits Hungarian historical experience. Very little was just given to you as a nation. You've earned and fought for everything you have.

By the way, Ed met Bob when they worked together in the 1970s for the Texas oil company Cameron. And, in the 1990s when Cameron looked for a foreign partner to make surface well head covers for oil rigs, guess what? Ed got his first chance to visit Budapest when Cameron visited to find a Hungarian supplier. The Hungarians were the only ones who could make the well head covers to high enough quality specifications for American use. That was not a surprise to Mr. Szymczak, the honorary freedom fighter, who was quite familiar with quality Hungarian engineers.

Hungarians won many friends and earned respect the world over in 1956. And that impact was profound and continues today.

In closing, allow me to quote one of my favorite passages from Hungarian political philosopher, Istvan Bibo, written in 1946<sup>1</sup>: “Being a democrat means, primarily, not to be afraid; not to be afraid of those who have differing opinions, speak different languages, or belong to other races; not to

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<sup>1</sup> Istvan Bibo's “Distress of the East European Small States”

be afraid of revolutions, conspiracies, the unknown malicious intent of enemies, hostile propaganda, being demeaned, or any of those imaginary dangers that become truly dangerous because we are afraid of them.”<sup>2</sup>

Not to be afraid.

In 1956 many in Hungary were not afraid. They were not afraid to stand up as freedom fighters. They were not afraid and they were democrats standing alone in a very undemocratic post-World War II wasteland, lost in a backwards Soviet ideology. They stood up and deserve our respect today. Because they did so, Hungary was changed and the Hungarian revolution played a distinct role in eventually changing the entire Soviet Union. And they affected the world then and continue to do so today as evidenced by the stories of the Ed Szymczaks and Bob Schoens of the world.

Let us remember Bibo’s words and the actions of those believers in freedom who were not afraid to stand up in 1956, those representatives of democracy. They deserve our respect and appreciation and the world would be well advised to take the lessons of 1956 to heart.

Don’t be afraid. Actions do matter. And, for those who understand that, it is up to us to ensure that those actions are never forgotten.

Thank you very much.

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<sup>2</sup> Bibo played an active role in the revolution and was actually the last minister of the temporary National Government to leave parliament when the Soviet tanks rolled back in and wrote on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1956 the proclamation: “For Freedom and Truth”.



ED SZYMCEK (1956)