

# 56 FACES

Memories of Hungary 1956



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## Memories of Hungary 1956

56 Faces shares the stories and memories of Hungarians who came to Victoria as political refugees after the 1956 Hungarian uprising.

Photographer Susan Gordon-Brown and writer Sandy Watson have created 56 Faces in collaboration with Hungarian communities throughout Victoria, including the 1956-2006 Hungarian Revolution Commemorative Organising Committee and the Melbourne Hungarian Community Centre.

The idea for 56 Faces came as a result of research for Veronika, a non-fiction book that Sandy Watson has written about a woman who fled Hungary and came to Melbourne as a political refugee after the uprising. During research for this book Sandy worked extensively with the Hungarian community here in Victoria, including speaking to 56ers about their experiences. As a result, Sandy and Susan came across these untold stories of people who had done extraordinary things in extraordinary times.

Susan and Sandy have treasured the opportunity to hear these stories. We thank all of the 56ers for welcoming us into their homes and placing their trust in us. We have been profoundly moved by the great courage, acceptance and generosity of spirit that we have encountered along the way.



**Australian Government**  
**Department of Immigration  
and Multicultural Affairs**



## An uprising is born

**On 23 October 1956 the Hungarian secret police opened fire on unarmed demonstrators outside the Budapest Radio Station.**

Many years of hatred of Soviet-style oppression and a brutal secret police exploded and an uprising was born.

Five days of fierce bloodshed ensued and many thousands of lives were lost.

Boys and girls and men and women throughout Budapest and Hungary came together and did whatever they could to fight the Hungarian secret police and Soviet troops, who came to symbolise the oppression that Hungarians were fighting against. People of all ages and political persuasions joined in the fight, finding weapons wherever they could and fashioning their own Molotov cocktails.

On 27 October 1956 Hungarians celebrated in joy as a ceasefire was called and the Soviets agreed to withdraw.

On 4 November the world awoke to international calls for help from Imre Nagy, Prime Minister for the new government. The Soviet army had moved in to crush the uprising, and it did so with a massive show of armed force.

## Help never came

By January 1957, the Kádár regime began looking for anybody who had been on the side of the freedom fight. A new period of retributions began. The Kádár government stayed in place until the first public elections were held in Hungary in 1989.

Although ultimately unsuccessful, the 1956 Hungarian uprising was the first real armed opposition to Soviet communist expansion throughout Eastern Europe.

56 Faces shares the stories and memories of Hungarians from around Victoria who took part and witnessed events. It explains why the 1956 uprising was a catalyst for their coming to Australia as political refugees.

# Life in communist Hungary

The uprising erupted out of many years of oppression throughout Hungary. Food shortages were chronic, and people had to queue for many hours for basics like bread and milk.

People lived every day with the fear that they might be reported to the authorities for transgressions such as making jokes about or criticising the government, or falling behind in food and tax quotas.

The worst years were between 1949 and 1953, when Prime Minister Mátyás Rákosi introduced a Stalinist-style dictatorship throughout the country.

## JUDITH JURICKSKAY

Student, Budapest

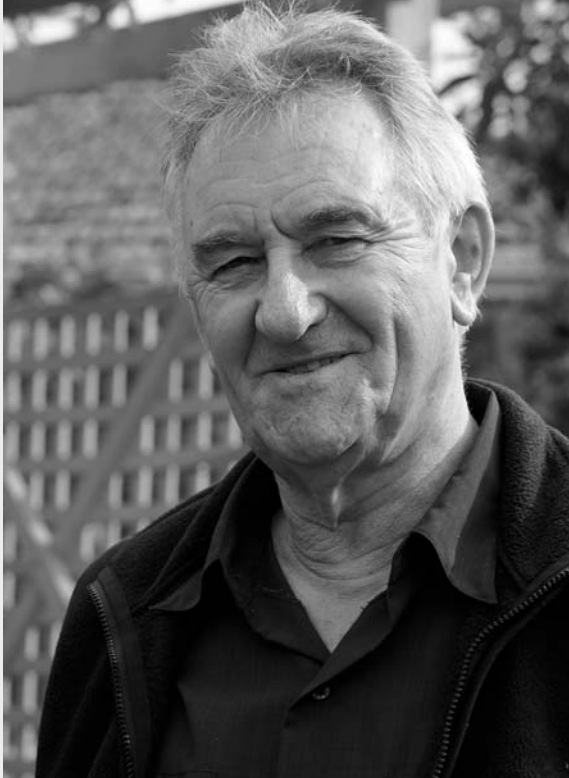
My grandmother was imprisoned because her own son doxxed her in to the police, it was not only neighbour against neighbour, the communists actually managed to infiltrate families, family members against family members, and so people couldn't trust even their next of kin.

My grandmother had slaughtered a pig on the side, and she hadn't told the authorities. My uncle, her son, found out and told the authorities so grandmother was imprisoned for slaughtering a pig that she hadn't told the government about. Grandmother stayed in prison for about 2½ years, she would have been about 60 years old.

The system discouraged even family closeness. It encouraged isolation.

That's why the revolution was such a marvellous thing. People walked out of their homes and joined in.





## ZOLTÁN VALLAY

Telephone technician, Komló

The regime didn't trust me because of my father's political background, he had been in a counter intelligence unit during the Second World War.

Father was arrested in September 1952, and my mother and sister and two young nephews had to leave home with only one hour to pack. The communists ransacked the house looking for American dollars and signs that father was involved in spying.

I wasn't home; I was working as a surveyor's assistant with my sister's brother-in-law, a surveyor. When I came home I found the house locked up with seals on it. The neighbour stuck her head out and told me what happened, and that my family had gone to a little village called Rohod near the Ukraine border. She said that because they only had one hour to pack, mother put everything onto a carpet and dragged it up the road past a field of corn, that was all she could salvage.

I thought I had been overheard talking to someone, telling jokes or whatever. I didn't realise father had been taken away. I kept thinking 'What have I done?' I travelled by bike to Rohod. I travelled at night so that I could avoid the authorities and I rode in the dark without headlights. When I arrived my mother explained that father had been arrested.

We were billeted with the teacher's wife and we couldn't leave the village. I reported to the police once a week and they checked up on us all the time to make sure we were there. They used to knock on our door in the middle of the night.

After that, I couldn't do anything freely. I applied for university but wasn't accepted. I wasn't allowed to live in Budapest. I couldn't apply for any positions that I wanted. I really had no future.



## ELIZABETH ATYIMÁS

Student, Baja

My parents always wished they could go back 'home'. Life under communism wasn't good. For us children, even though we knew things weren't good, as long as there was someone there to love you, we accepted that that was just life.

We didn't talk about communism or the regime. We didn't talk about anything except what we were going to eat tonight or tomorrow, or how we were going to buy a pair of stockings. The best Christmas present we ever got was an orange. There were 3 of us and we had to share it. We were so happy to share that one orange.

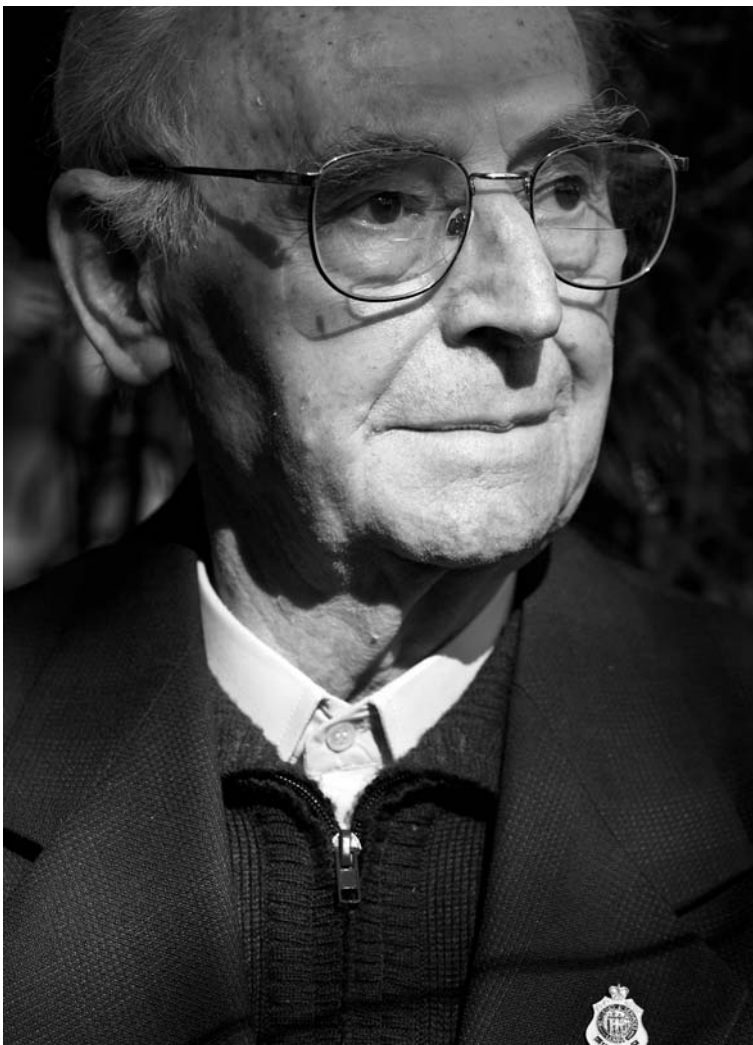
We never had really enough food. We had one set of clothes for Sunday and one set of clothes for school. My parents always joked that you took your clothes off in front of the washbasin to wash and then went to the fence to dress yourself, hoping that your clothes were dry.

My father was so happy about the uprising. Life was very hard for my parents. My father was a Hungarian soldier. He was captured in 1944 and became a Russian prisoner of war. It wasn't a prison, it was a concentration camp. My father was still a young man when he came back in 1948, but he had aged so much that everybody thought my mother was his daughter not his wife. Whenever he left the house, he kept looking back the whole time, looking over his shoulder. He never felt that safety again, he always expected the secret police to be watching.



# Landowners

Individuals and their families were identified as class aliens if they held a position of authority under previous government regimes, had independent wealth or fought in the Royal Hungarian Army during the Second World War. This made it virtually impossible for people to attend college or university or attain employment in chosen areas. Landowners and business people were stripped of their wealth and often either deported to another part of the country or put into internment camps.



## JÁNOS PÁL

Planning officer, Pécs

**I had to interpret the party rules that covered landowners, or kulaks.**

Under the communist regime, landowners were allowed to have income or land or produce equivalent to 21 gold crown acres, which was about twenty acres of land. If you had more than that you were called kulaks. Landowners who were classified as kulaks had their land and possessions taken away, and many were sent to internment camps. These were really forced labour camps, there were three of them in Hungary, including the infamous Recsk.

I couldn't live with categorising people as kulaks and having them lose everything or go to internment camp. Because of my job in the State Public Service (Megyei Tanács), I knew the rules for land ownership and I knew that some people were being penalised under the system for being landholders when according to the letter of the law they weren't really. Some of these people were only considered to be kulaks because they were working hard. I knew that as a notary I could correct the land titles record and give landowners documents justifying that they weren't kulaks, which allowed them to work.

Sometimes I had ten or twenty people waiting at my door, waiting for me to give them documents saying they were not kulaks. The party secretary in Pécs came and invited me in for an interview. He said 'What's happened with you? You are helping the kulaks. You are taking people off the list. You must know that this is very serious. We will punish you very seriously.'



## **ETHEL SÜLLY**

### **Landowners, Baja**

**My parents were landowners, they were classed as kulaks.**

Father was taken away because a Yugoslavian man slept at our place one night and then escaped over the border to Yugoslavia. The secret police thought my father was collaborating with the Yugoslavian regime. They just came and took him away. He was put in a very strict prison for political prisoners, Csillag Börtön, the Star Prison, in Szeged. When my mother went to see father she fainted because the prisoners looked in such a bad way. Father didn't talk about his experience much. He just wanted to forget it. When he came home, he was quite sick. In the end he had eighteen cases of pneumonia, twelve in prison, and six afterwards.

We hated that regime and what they did. As a teenager, it was very hard not having my father around. I was 14 when I had to leave school to find work, picking fruit or whatever, to earn money because father was taken away.

My family escaped on the 7th of January. But when we went through the border my mother changed her mind, she couldn't bear to leave her parents. She begged me to go back with them. I cried every day but still I was determined not to go back.

## **HONEY ARANYOS**

### **Railway worker, Budapest**

**My parents were business people in a small country town.**

They suffered a lot under the Rákosi regime. My father started a tailor business and my mother took over when he died. My mother and stepfather, a cabinetmaker, bought a ute so that they could pack in suits and trousers and hang clothes up and go from market to market with the tailor business.

People in our town, Kunágota, thought we were very rich because we had a car and my parents had a business. That's what happened under the communist regime. If you tried to improve yourself or your family life or buy something, people got jealous and dobbed you in. The same with landowners, kulaks, because they had more land. We were in the same boat because my parents had a car and a business.

In 1950, the communist government took everything from us - the business, shop, equipment and car.

I didn't want to suffer like my parents did. I wanted to have a better life, a freer life.



# Political prisoners and underground

Freedom of speech disappeared completely as a network of informers and secret police enforced the Stalinist-style dictatorship introduced by Mátyás Rákosi in his years as Prime Minister (1949-1953 and 1955-1956).

The secret police and security police, called the AVO or AVH, which translates to State Protection Authority, were hated for their KGB-style policing, which included interrogation and torture.

People were punished severely for anything that could be perceived as anti-communist. Between 500,000 and 600,000 Hungarians were imprisoned during the worst years of 1949 through to 1953.

## PETER FEKETE

**Political prisoner, freedom fighter, Szeged**

My wife Ági was five months pregnant when early one Sunday morning the Hungarian secret police came and took me away. That was really very sad because the next Monday I would have passed the university exam and Friday I would get my law and political science diploma. That devastated my family and myself.

I spent more than four months in the hands of the secret police, the AVO.

Normally I don't talk about those four months, but this I have to tell. They worked us over. After many late night and early morning interrogations, two AVO guards with submachine guns took me to the officer who had been questioning me. You didn't even know they were coming because there was thick carpet outside the cell. The officer asked me to sign a statement.

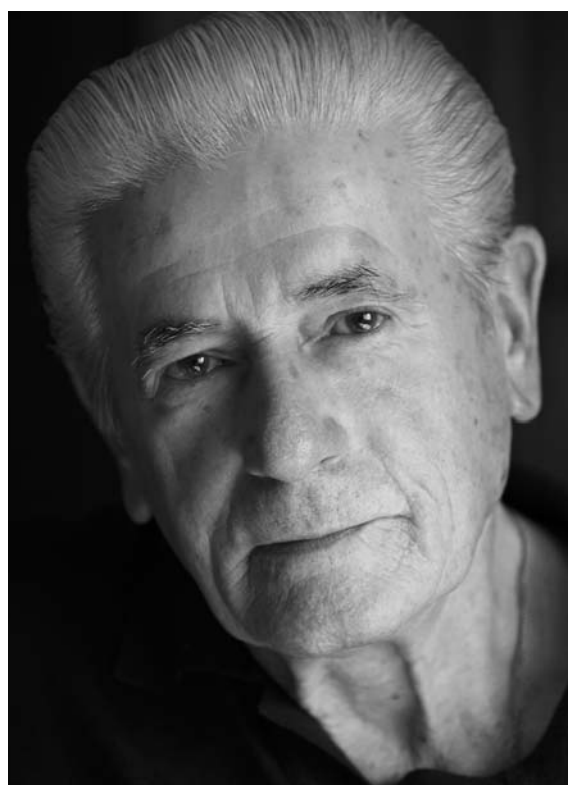
I refused, and told him 'I am 23 years old and I want to live to see my child and wife.'

They told me my wife was also going to be arrested unless I signed a statement. That's when I signed it.

I was sentenced to three years' imprisonment for being in the underground. When I heard that I got three years, I was as happy as a person who has won tattslooto, so happy that I wouldn't be taken back to the secret police headquarters and tortured again.

Our underground movements proved that we Hungarians were against the oppressive communist dictatorship; our resistance eventually led to the Hungarian revolution in 1956.

During the revolution, I was in charge of an armed unit. I was responsible for a very risky action, 30 kilometres from Szeged, a small township called Makó.





## JÓZSEF MONEK

**Political prisoner, freedom fighter  
Szentgotthárd**

**I never ever wanted to leave my country. I was forced to leave because of the communist regime, under Mátyás Rákosi, where human rights were non-existent.**

I was in prison because I helped one of my friends, I handed out pamphlets for him. I was jailed in 1953 and I went through hell in the hands of the secret police, the AVO, and in Fő street prison in Buda. They tortured me and that's how I lost all my teeth at the age of 17.

I don't want to talk about it because it's not decent to talk about it. I read similar things about what the Gestapo did, but I tell you the Communists made the Gestapo look like kindergarten boys.

Every night when I prayed, I prayed that just once I could fill up my stomach. I went down to 40 kg from 72 kg in less than 21 months. I had another sickness because of the AVO, I was passing blood for seven months.

They let me out on amnesty in 1955, but I couldn't get any jobs that I wanted and I decided in 1956 I have to go. So myself and a mate who just came out of jail, we crossed the Iron Curtain into Austria in late August 1956.

That's where we were on 23 October 1956 when one of the officers of the Austrian police told me that the uprising started in Hungary. We wanted to fight for our country, so we packed our bags on the 24th and arrived in Hungary on the 25th.



## JENŐ KAPITÁNY

**Underground, freedom fighter, Siófok**

**I was an anti-communist and I had guns always in my possession.**

Before the uprising I went around the country looking for similar minded people who were ready to step in and work against the Russians behind the front line in the case of war between the Western and Eastern powers.

I called on my friends to get ready and start fighting. We organised a demonstration against the communists and to help Budapest. Thousands of people took part. We grabbed three flags out of the hotel storeroom and I cut out the communist emblem. My friend and I went to the front of the march, singing the military march and carrying the flags.

We found out that most of the communist officials in Siófok were armed up. I said to the party secretary 'Leave the guns here. We don't want to harm you, we came here only to stop the killing. There's enough blood flowing in Budapest. Put down the guns and leave in peace.'

We took the weapons to the police station. We set up the national guard and handed over anybody who had served in the secret police to the authorities.

On November 3rd we got telephone news that a heavy movement of Russians was advancing toward Siófok, 100 or 120 tanks and trucks with infantry. At 10.30, Siófok radio transmitter tower, the second strongest in Europe, started transmitting as the free radio of Hungary, letting people know that Russian troops were pouring into Hungary, and calling on them to keep supporting the revolution.



## LÁSZLÓ MOLNÁR

### Political prisoner

With the help of a friend, I found a job driving for a liquor factory in Cegléd. One night, another driver and I had a couple of glasses of wine after work. When we were walking home we collided with a man on the narrow footpath. He turned towards us and said 'You drunkards.' We had an altercation, and parted with his words 'I don't know you but I know your friends. You will hear from me.'

The next day the secret police picked me up; that man was a communist party secretary. The interrogation went on and on. They started beating my hands, kidneys, feet, the usual. They took me to Szeged and district secret police headquarters. The interrogations started again, more beating. My whole body was bloodstained.

From there they took me to Markó street prison in inner city Budapest. When my release was authorised, I went to the gate to leave. The secret police stopped me and said 'László Molnár, you are under arrest again.'

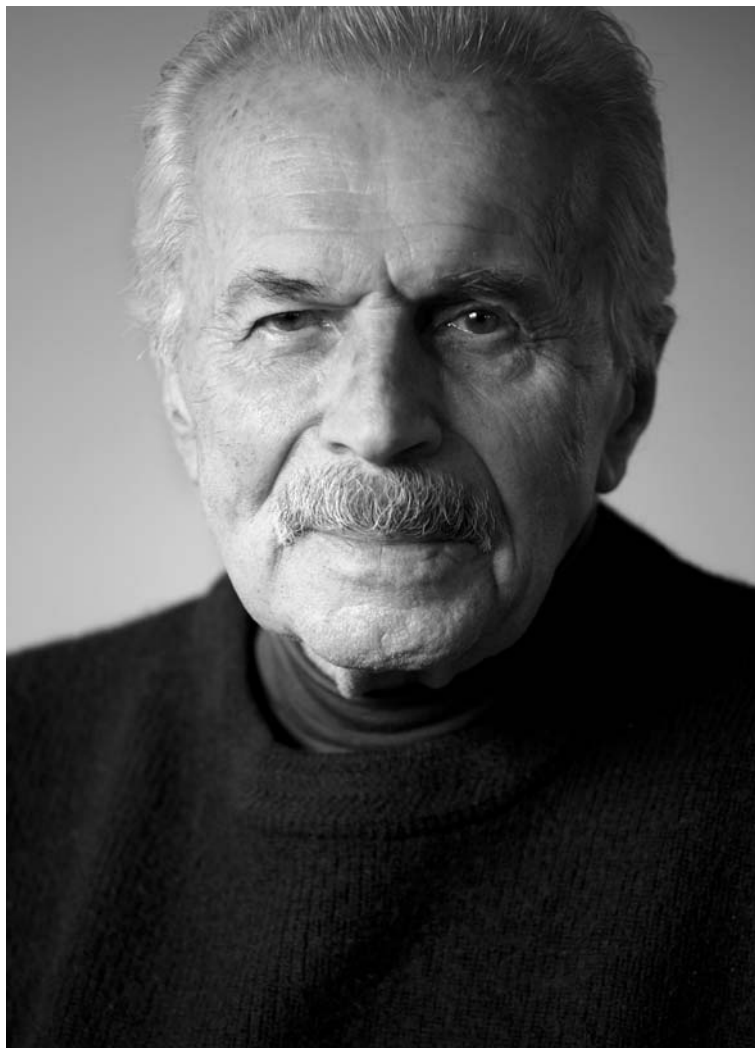
They handcuffed me and walked me to 60 Andrassy boulevard, headquarters of the secret police in Budapest. The interrogations started again. Towards the end, a uniformed security policeman laughed in my face and said 'You didn't think we would let you go so easily, did you?'

They were trying to find out if I had any anti-communist feelings. I wasn't worried, because I knew I didn't do anything. All I could do was tell the truth.

From there they sent me to an internment camp called Kistarcsa, outside Budapest. At first it was managed by the ordinary police; they treated us quite well. Then the secret police took over. One night they took us to the nearest railway station, loaded us into cattle cars and took us to Recsk. The next day we started to work. The treatment was very bad; you were completely humiliated.

One man escaped from Recsk and talked about his experiences on Radio Free Europe in Munich. That's how the West knew that there were Russian-style concentration camps in Hungary.

In 1953, after Stalin died, they let us out. We had to sign a declaration that we would not tell anybody about Recsk.



One man escaped from Recsk and talked about his experiences on Radio Free Europe in Munich.

**That's how the West knew that there were Russian-style concentration camps in Hungary.**

# An uprising is born

Students from Budapest Technical University developed sixteen points for change that they wanted to take to the government and broadcast to the Hungarian people. They marched, singing national songs and chanting, to the statues of much-loved national poet Sándor Petőfi, whose poem inspired the 1848 uprising, and József Bem, a Polish General who fought beside the Hungarians in that uprising.

Despite the fact that public demonstrations were banned, thousands upon thousands of people of all ages and backgrounds joined in and were swept along by optimism and hopes for peaceful change. The marches continued to Parliament House, where calls for change grew more spirited, and to Budapest Radio Station, where the crowd demanded that its sixteen points for change be broadcast.



## FRANK STYEVKO

Student, Budapest Technical University

I was an architecture student. We had been listening to the events in Poland with great interest. That was a catalyst for us to start to talk more and more and to hold three or four meetings in the university. We decided to put sixteen points for change together and to march to General Bem's statue as a peaceful way of making our wishes known. The main thing we wanted was for Russian dominance to be lessened.

As we marched, people from the streets joined us, and I handed them pamphlets with the points for change that we had put together. There was a big crowd at Bem's statue, and calls for radical change became stronger and stronger, including calls for the Russians to leave Hungary.

The crowd marched to Parliament. The square in front was completely filled with people. They were calling out slogans like 'Russkies go home', 'We want Imre Nagy'. It's funny how quickly the crowd identified with each other. These calls really cemented people together.

Eventually, word came that something was happening at the radio station. A large group of us walked the two kilometres to the narrow little street directly opposite in Múzeum-Körút, the street around the National Museum. I tried to go closer, but the secret police started shooting from the radio station. Tear gas started to burn my eyes. Then I saw a body being carried away on a stretcher. Everybody was rushing out of the street, and I turned around and went with the crowd. Someone covered the body with a Hungarian flag. People were screaming out to retaliate. That's when it really hit me, that huge things were taking place.





## JOHN PENZES

**Actor, Budapest Theatre Company**

**I was right inside the radio station when the secret police started shooting. I was an actor, and once a week or so, I did a radio program which was broadcast to Hungarians overseas. I got to the radio station at about 4.30 or 5.00 in the afternoon. By then the narrow street outside the radio station was jam-packed.**

The secret police guards were already inside. There was total uncertainty among them. Somehow nobody asked questions and I went inside and up to the first floor where all the activity was. Normally I would never have dared to venture into the forbidden sector, where management were, it was a no-go zone, and the AVO wouldn't let you.

I could hear that there was total upheaval outside. Inside, there was total indecision, a type of fear; a mass demonstration was unheard of.

Then somebody went out on the balcony to try to calm the crowd down. That person said 'Comrades', and the crowd roared 'We are not comrades, we are Hungarians.' There was total upheaval.

The secret police were already shooting from the radio building windows and there were shots outside. I'll never forget, there was hysteria among the actors and actresses; the women's makeup was running down their faces.

Secret police reinforcements came through the garage and the rear entrance. They were pouring in, hundreds of them, fixing bayonets onto guns, Russian sub-machine guns, opening hand grenades. I was a trained soldier, so I thought 'This is it'.



## KLÁRA PATAY

**Theatrical art and stage design, Budapest**

**I was sitting in my office when one of my friends came up with a briefcase. He said 'Klára this briefcase contains flyers. If you don't mind, would you give these out to people.'**

I was glad to do it. From early 1956, I had been going to meetings with students and ex-students and teachers at the Petőfi Literature Circle Auditorium where we often discussed ideas for change which were incorporated into the sixteen points that students and writers wanted to broadcast through the radio.

It was nearly 5 in the afternoon. I packed up and went towards the museum gardens but the crowd was impenetrable. I continued walking on Múzeum-Körút (Museum street), which was densely packed with cheerful, friendly people. I gave away the flyers, and to my happy surprise, they were just grabbed out of my hands. Everybody was brimming with happy expectations, despite the risk to all.

I gave out all of the pamphlets then decided to go to Parliament House. When I went to Parliament House, it was densely overcrowded but everyone was smiling. People started to talk in a very intimate way about the sudden political situation of recent days. I felt in heaven. Imre Nagy's speech at 8 o'clock was very unpopular.

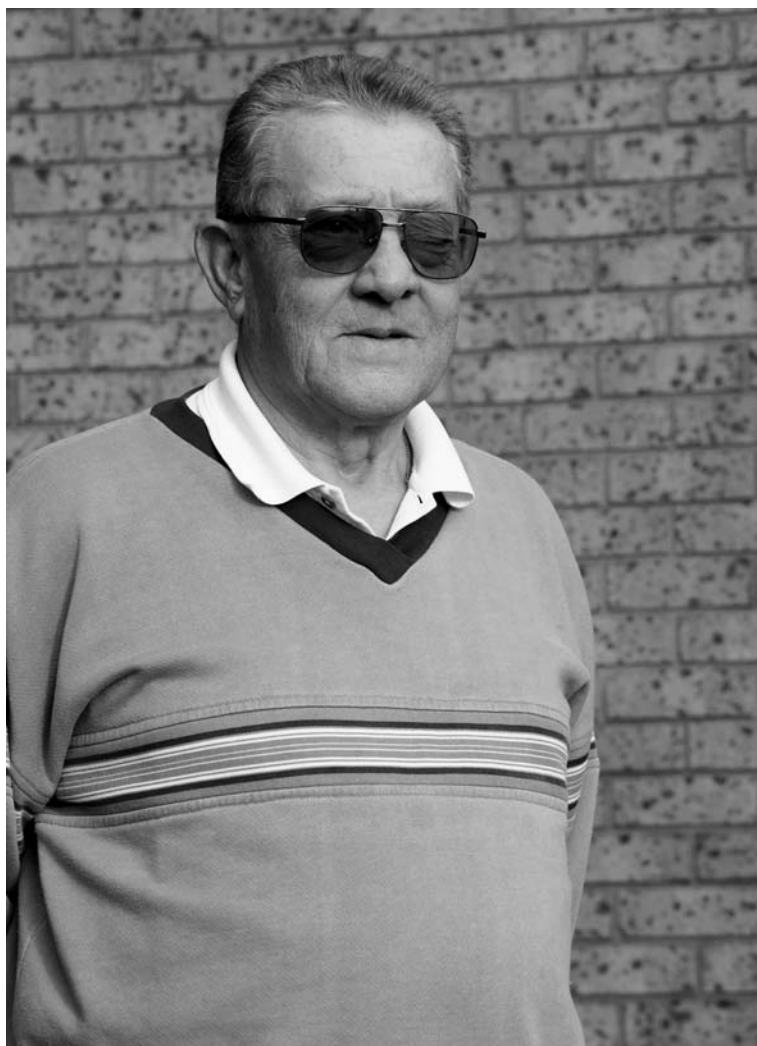
Then trucks with civilians and Hungarian soldiers came from the opposite side of the square. People said 'There's been shooting at the radio station.' The workers started giving out rifles. I got very frightened. From one minute to the next the euphoria changed to complete desperation.



# The fight for freedom

The uprising started on 23 October 1956 when the Hungarian secret police fired tear gas and then bullets into peaceful demonstrators at Budapest Radio Station. Five days of fierce bloodshed ensued and many lives were lost.

Boys and girls and men and women throughout Budapest and Hungary came together and did whatever they could to fight the Hungarian secret police and Soviet troops, who both came to symbolise the oppression that Hungarians were fighting against. People of all ages and political persuasions joined in the fight, finding weapons wherever they could and fashioning their own Molotov cocktails.



## LÁSZLÓ BUDAHÁZY DE VESKÖCZ

**Freedom fighter, Budafok**

One of my friends died... That's what set us off. He was the same age as me. A group of 50 or 60 of us started to figure out how we could fight the Russians. We all just said 'Let's do something,' so we formed a unit.

We went to the Hungarian army barracks in Budafok and got a 122 mm field gun. We decided to block Balaton Road so no Russians could come towards Budapest. We dragged the gun up to the top of Budafok Hill, overlooking the aerodrome. From the edge of the aerodrome, eight or ten Russian field guns were bombarding the city. We were hidden on top of the hill with a heavy calibre machine gun and cannon. Anybody coming along the main road from Balaton had to pass through a cutting fifteen metres below us.

The Russians were too busy with us to do the job they were supposed to. They sent some troops, mostly infantry, with tanks from behind and tried to get us with a pincer movement. We climbed out through a gully that led down the side of the hill, we lost nine guys there but the rest of us, 40 or 50 guys, got away.

We were harassing the Russians for days afterwards, that is what guerrillas do. We didn't do it for fun, we tried to do the best we could. Nine of us were killed outright during the fighting; another 14 were executed afterwards.



I woke up in hospital, and I heard about what happened on the 4th of November from the nurses. It was a terrible shock. **Many people died for nothing. We were still in the same shoes, like before.**

## **MIKE THOMAS**

### **Freedom fighter, Budapest**

We were so upset that innocent people were being shot. We wanted to find a way to save people, but we didn't have anything to shoot back with. That's why we tried to get guns. To shoot back.

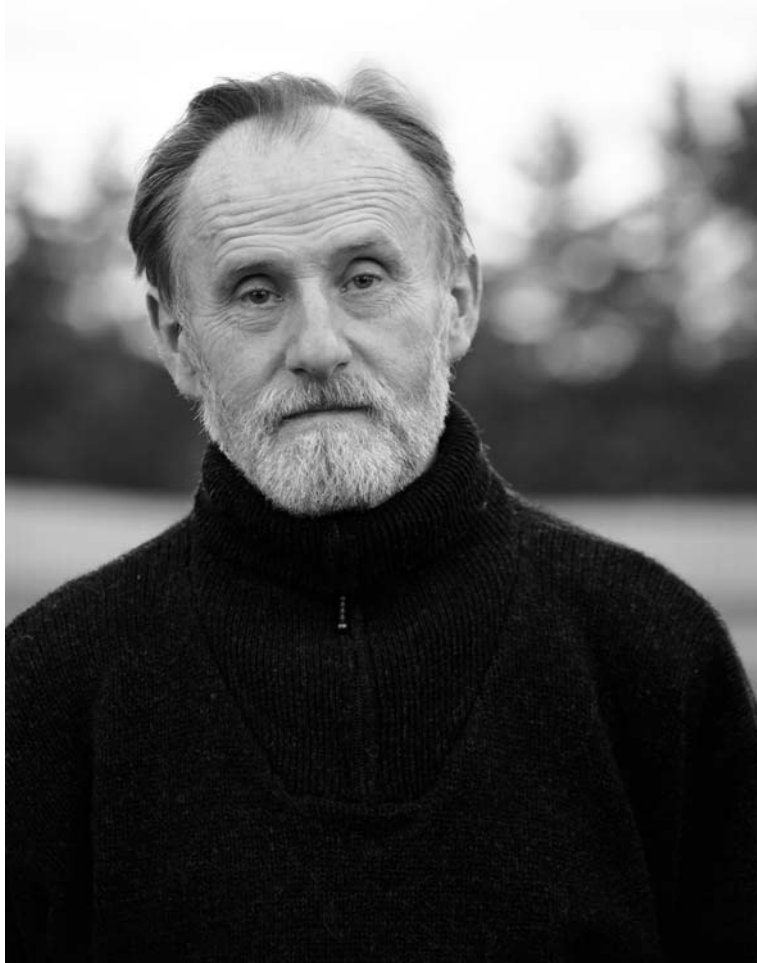
Thirty or so of us, we came together on the 24th of October. Nobody knew each other, we just came together to fight for better living conditions, for a better life. We went to the police station to get some guns and they told us to go to the Hungarian army barracks about two kilometres away. When we asked at the army depot for weapons, they said, 'Take as much as you want.'

Everybody grabbed whatever they could find. I took a Russian machine gun with two boxes of bullets and some hand grenades. I knew how to use them because I served in the army for two years, I finished my army service in 1954.

From there we went by truck to Soroksári street, a T-intersection with the main road coming from the south of Budapest. We knew that the Russians would come this way towards the centre of Budapest. A railway line ran beside the road, crossed the road at the intersection, and then ran along the other side of the road. We put three or four train carriages across the road to act as a roadblock.

We were underneath the carriages when we saw the Russians coming on the 26th of October. There were about ten tanks, and some soldiers on foot. They were trying to blast their way through the carriages so they had a free road to the city. With twenty or thirty men we couldn't do much, but we tried to hold them back anyway.

That's how I got shot. I got one bullet in my back, another in my backside. I was hit in the head and both legs with shrapnel. I was unconscious with a head injury and I don't remember anything after that.



**STEVE PÁLOS**  
Freedom fighter, Budafok

**My friends from Budafok got together and said ‘We have to do something.’**

My friends from Budafok got together and said ‘We have to do something.’

We got weapons and set ourselves up on Budafok Hill where the main highway passes into Budapest from western Hungary. That was our point of defence, but the real fighting started for us after the 4th of November.

After the ceasefire, I went into town to celebrate and look around. It was amazing how badly three or four days of fighting had affected Budapest. I couldn’t believe it. In Kálvin Square and around the museum, some houses were shot to nothing by tanks. It was early in the morning, there were still freedom fighters from the previous night, and there were still corpses around. At the corner of Kilián Barracks, on Üllői Road and Corvin Square, the metre-thick walls had been completely demolished, the whole corner of the barracks had been demolished. At that corner and further up there were many Russian trucks and some tanks, all burnt out, still left from where Russian soldiers tried to take shelter and were burnt to death.

After the 4th, that’s when the bitter end of the fighting started. We knew it was absolutely hopeless. Everybody knew that at the time. It felt very bitter, a bit frightening. But the main thing was the determination,

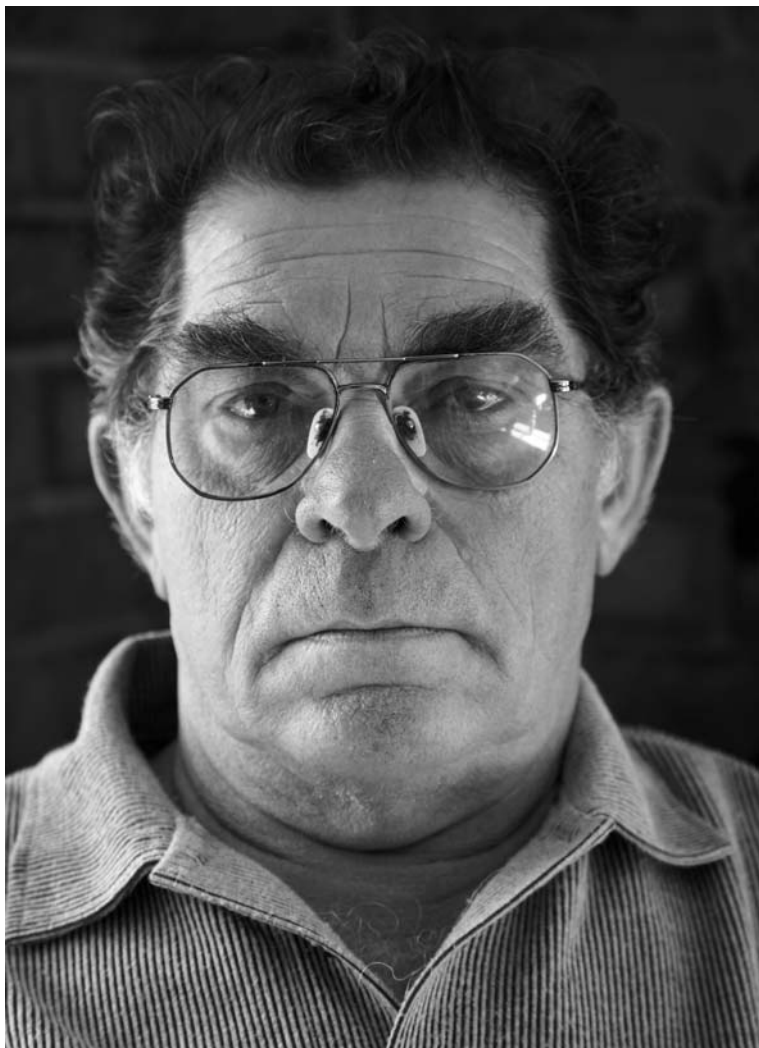
the feeling ‘We have to do something, we won’t give up.’ We tried to get the fear or hopelessness out of our minds. Otherwise we wouldn’t keep going.

We all felt the determination to go on. Thirty or forty of us maintained our position on the top of Budafok Hill until the 12th of November, when we were forced to retreat.

As the days went by freedom fighters got more and more silenced in different parts of Budapest. One of the longest areas of fighting was across the Danube from Budafok, on Csepel Island, an industrial area, a forest of chimneys. Even when we believed that fighting was almost finished, the fighting on Csepel Island continued. We used to go up on Budafok Hill and watch. It was almost like fireworks, with tracers from heavy guns and firing from both sides, explosions and flashes. Fighting was sustained there for quite a few days and nights.

I decided to leave at the end of November. I hid my things, a submachine gun, a rifle, hand grenades and so on so that they couldn’t cause trouble for my father or other brother, and then I left.





**STEVE TÓTH**  
Freedom fighter, Budapest

**My boss and I were at Republic Square, called Köztársaság Square, when revolutionaries attacked the secret police AVH headquarters on Tuesday 30 October. A lot of people got killed on both sides, freedom fighters, and 43 secret police.**

There were Hungarians shooting Hungarians, Russians shooting Russians, Russians shooting Hungarians, Hungarians shooting Russians. Unless the flag was out, you didn't know who was who. A lot of the Russian soldiers had been in Europe from after the war – I would say 50-80% of those people all went to the Hungarian side.

I was walking across the park and I saw a 14-year-old kid with a gun, a rifle. I took the gun off him, and told him to go home to his mother.

I met my boss, the head chef at OTI health centre, where I was a chef, at the park. Then everybody was shooting. So I stayed, it wasn't planned.

I was behind a big tree, I saw bullets coming and some kids younger than me behind bushes nearby. Before I could say get out of there, you have no protection, they got shot. There was a lot of confusion because things were unorganised, there was crossfire caused by revolutionaries. My boss said 'You stay here, I am going to shut the machine gun down,' because there was cross-firing.

A Hungarian tank came from the other side of the park. It was helping the freedom fighters. Then there

was more crossfire. I said to myself 'I have to get back to the tank, otherwise I'll be like the kids beside me.' I crawled back beneath the grass, you had to hide under the grass otherwise the bullets would get you. By the time I got there, about five metres, the tank was shooting at the building and was coming towards me. It stopped about a metre from me, I was under the grass, it is frightening when you see a 25-tonne tank coming towards you and you don't know which way to move. Luckily the tank stopped, it was going back and forwards.

By about 4 in the afternoon it was finished. The revolutionaries went into the building and pulled out any communists they found. They pulled them out, and hanged seven of them up from trees in the park.

My father pre-empted the uprising. He was in a Russian prisoner of war camp for four years after the war, near Baku. He was 35 years old. He came home in 1949 weighing 49 kilograms. He knew the Hungarian people could only stand something they didn't deserve for so long. Every step of the way my father was with me.

# Waiting for the army

We lived in fear until the army joined the uprising, who knows what would have happened if they had taken the oppressor's side.

- Elizabeth Atyimás



## FRANK SZALAY

### Army, Kalocsa

**I was in the army, stationed about 80 kilometres from Budapest in Kalocsa.**

I was out guarding ammunition and explosives. We came back to the army camp after lunchtime, cleaned our guns and put our ammunition in order. While we were doing that, somebody heard on the radio that there was a demonstration in Budapest. Then we heard that the army major had received a message from Budapest saying that we would be given orders to go and put down the uprising.

This would mean shooting at university students, our own people. We knew each other very well in that outfit, the 300 of us had been in the army together for one year. We came together to talk and we all said that we should support the uprising. We agreed that we were going to hold on to our sub-machine guns and support the uprising rather than following orders.

It wasn't an easy decision. We knew what we were risking. To go against army orders in communist Hungary meant that we would be risking court martial or even being shot. I knew that we would come to a situation where whatever we did would be wrong. To shoot your own people is wrong, we could never do that. But we also knew that against the Russians we could not win without the help of Western countries. Eventually we would be gathered and court martialled, imprisoned or shot.

This was the choice we had: shooting our own people or going against orders and putting our own lives at stake. So we risked our own lives because you cannot, you just cannot shoot your own brother or sister or cousin or somebody's father.

When they assembled us at 6 o'clock to tell us we would be going by truck to Budapest, we refused. We had kept our arms, including sub-machine guns, so that if any of the officers moved against us, we could shoot back. But we didn't have to worry because some of the officers felt the same way we did. And there were so many of us, that any officers who might have disagreed were too scared to say anything.

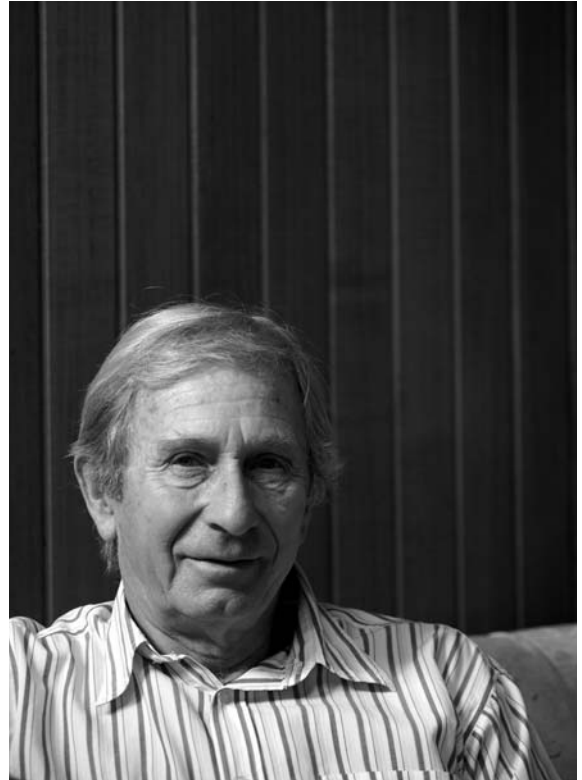
## VID JURICKSAY

### Army, Monok

**We were positioned a long way from Budapest, on the eastern side of Hungary, close to the border.**

We were at a small place called Monok, right out in the bush, not even a town. We were a small unit, we were just working, we were not involved in army activities.

Hearing about the uprising was a great feeling. Of course that day we didn't know what was going to happen. The army held us back until it looked like the revolution succeeded, and then they said 'All right boys, that's it, you are free to go.' So we all jumped into an army truck, drove up to Budapest, and went home.



## RÓBERT ARANYOS

### Army, Pécs

**I was in Pécs, in the army. Two years' army service was compulsory for men aged over 20 in Hungary.**

I was in what they call a working brigade; we had army training but we were put to work. We were building two, three and four storey houses for the uranium miners in Pécs, at the old airport. We were paid but the cost of all our food and clothes was deducted.

I stayed in Pécs. We were never ordered to fight against the revolutionaries.

Although there wasn't a great movement like in Budapest or some other towns, there was still some activity because the freedom fighters and opposing Russians were both trying to take over the main hill overlooking Pécs where the Hungarian army radio tower was based.

Everyone was celebrating, everyone was happy...finally we would get our freedom back it looked like.

We lost everything on the 4th of November. That was the end of our celebrations. It was such a disappointment, terribly disappointing, because it was Hungarians against Hungarians. The Hungarian Army went against the Hungarian people and if anybody disagreed with them there was shooting left, right and centre.

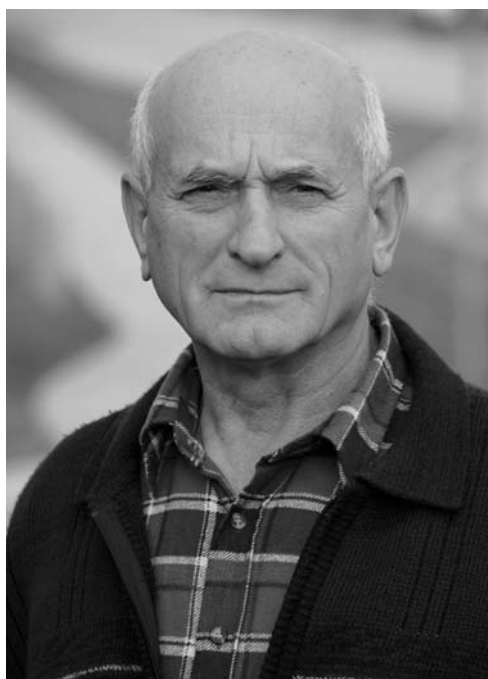
After the 4th of November, the working brigades were disbanded.



# During the uprising

Symbols of the Soviet government were removed and destroyed. The communist hammer and sickle in the centre of the Hungarian flag were cut out. Red stars were taken down from buildings and Russian monuments such as the 8 metre high bronze statue of Stalin in Budapest were destroyed.

Some Russians, stationed with Soviet troops in Hungary since 1945, joined the freedom fighters.



## GEORGE SZABÓ

Army, Kiskörös

**I was in Hajós, my hometown, in southern Hungary, on sick leave from the army.**

I helped take down the red star and knock over the Russian monument in Hajós. One of my friends decided to collect all the hunter's shotguns and ammunition from the central store. We were going to Kalocsa twenty kilometres away, there was a political prison especially for women there, and we decided to let the prisoners go. As it was already night we decided that we would free the prisoners in the morning. But word came that the prison was so fortified with secret police with machine guns and shotguns that we decided not to attempt it.

We listened to Radio Free Europe constantly, we hardly slept. We were hoping that a new era was coming. We were longing for change, some sort of democracy and an end to the oppression under the Rákosi and Gerő regimes.



## THOMAS PÁLFI

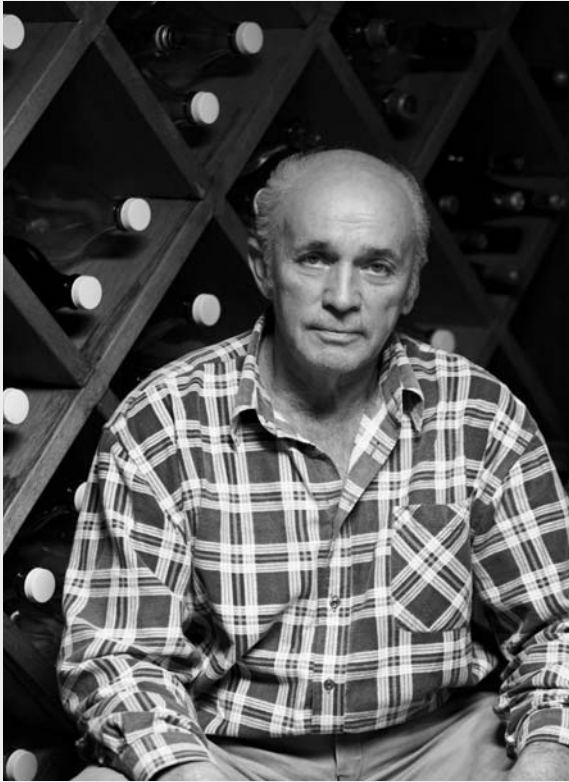
Student, Miskolc

**In Miskolc things were peaceful and optimistic. In Budapest, it was a much more warlike situation.**

The national guard was established and all members of the student union joined. The national guard was an informal institution to keep law and order and make sure there were no disturbances through the uprising. We walked the streets, that was all. We were heavily armed, I even slept with my gun beside the bed.

We felt proud. We felt that history was happening right in front of our eyes and we were taking part in it. There was anxiety because of the bloodshed in Budapest. We didn't want to start a war with Russia. We wanted peaceful change towards democracy. To undo all the wrongs that had been done in the past five or ten years.





## ALEX SÜLLY

**Factory Worker, Magyaróvár**

The first I heard about the massacre in Magyaróvár was when I rode home from work that night. I was riding my bike through the main street and everybody looked at me like I was a ghost. People told me that they thought I had been killed.

The fellow I was working with had told me about a march which was being organised in Magyaróvár. I thought it was going to be a solidarity march organised by the communist party, so I said, 'No, I'm not interested.'

It was to be a peaceful demonstration. The crowd - mostly grown ups and students and some children - walked up to the gates of the border guard barracks, the border security police, and asked them to take the red communist star off. The commander walked up to them and shook hands with the leader of the demonstrators. Then he walked aside and gave the sign to start shooting from only about twenty metres away. The border security police opened fire with machine guns and threw grenades into the crowd. It was a massacre. Eighty-six people were killed, and nearly 200 wounded. My workmate went and he was killed.

I went to the morgue to see the bodies. You never forget it. It was horrible. It was only a peaceful demonstration.



## JULIANNA BALÁZS

**Textile factory, Szeged**

I was working in a textile factory in Szeged and in the morning we were told we couldn't work because of the demonstrations.

We marched to City Square from the factory. One boy climbed up on top of the bus, and the AVO shot him down. Another four people were killed. Everybody threw themselves onto the ground.

People were very scared. Everybody was running all over the place. It was very, very bad. I wasn't frightened. I don't know why.

After the shooting broke out, a lot of people lost their shoes. I collected their shoes. Then everybody went home, we couldn't do anything, we didn't have guns.

After the Russians attacked, I still thought there was hope, because people were still not satisfied, not happy. I went back to the textile factory. Many people stayed there during the strikes, we weren't working. We all stayed there and listened to the radio and the Hungarian national anthem. I stood up and recited an anti-communist poem. It was written by a prisoner in Hungary and was really against the communists and Russians. That was why I had to leave.

We were on strike, and we listened to the radio every day, Kossuth radio, so we knew what was going on. Too many people were dying, it was very bad. We continued to strike for three weeks. We didn't have any guns. We were all waiting for some international help, for someone to bring guns, like they said on Radio Free Europe.



## MÁRIA TÓTH

Garden worker, Tatabánya

**Our boss told us what happened in Budapest, and we all decided to go see what was happening.**

It was evening, about 800 of us were standing in trucks, and we went from village to village at night. In every village people said the Russians are coming. We stopped the trucks, jumped out, and hid. When the Russians passed, we continued on to Budapest.

I was excited, because I worked 18-hour days and wanted change. On the way we stopped in Tatabánya at an army camp. We got some grenades and ammunition. We went in, 800 of us, and the army personnel gave us guns and pistols.

There was a lady doctor, she gave me a little silver revolver, in case anything happened, and if one of the Russians went to rape me, I could shoot myself.

We took bandages, I had learned nursing first aid and how to look after people. We were going to Budapest planning to save some people.

We couldn't get to the city, we got very close when we had to stop. We were crawling on the street, our bottoms in the air, because the tanks were coming. I took my best friend, and we were crawling, and crawling. My friends were dying on the street. People were shooting at each other and the tanks.

I said to my friend Elizabeth, 'There is something wrong, we're not meant to hurt people, and we're getting hurt. Come on, we're going home.'



## JIM BOGÁR

National Guard, Telekes

**I saw people with a Hungarian flag in their hands just walk against machine guns and tanks and not giving a damn whether they got shot down.**

When people get angry, they don't give a damn what you do to them. I didn't care whether I died or survived. People had had enough, that's why the revolution started, because there was that much pressure on everybody. Because the wages that you could get in the factories were only enough for bread and milk, nothing else.

It was terrible, living with that terror regime. It was unbelievable. Unbelievable.

My father was a farmer and we had to grow everything, potatoes, corn, wheat, everything for the animals, the cows, horses, pigs, and food for winter. We had a large family, my parents and four boys and one girl. Mother was crying, there was no dinner for dinnertime. I jumped on my bike and went to the next town, where I could get a half loaf of bread. Then I raced to another town for another half loaf of bread. By the time I got back I ate half the bread because I was so hungry.

# An end to the uprising

On 27 October 1956 Hungarians celebrated in joy as a ceasefire was called.

The Soviets agreed to withdraw and Hungary declared an independent government, headed up under the interim leadership of Imre Nagy, who was popular because of reforms he had instituted during his earlier time as Prime Minister (1953-1955).

The euphoria evaporated with the sound of Russian tanks at 4 am on 4 November. The Soviet army had moved in to crush the uprising, and it did so with a massive show of armed force.



**KÁLMÁN  
SOLYMOSSY**

Dancer, Budapest  
Opera

I took part in the demonstrations at Parliament House on the 25th of October. There were 2,000 - 3,000 people there. The crowd was calling on Gerő to resign, demanding that Imre Nagy be reinstated.

Then secret police started shooting from the agricultural ministry building opposite. It was horrendous. A bloodbath. One hundred and twenty people lost their lives and many were injured, mowed down, like rabbits. The blood was flowing on the pavement like water. Everybody was running and the police were shooting indiscriminately, whoever was closest. I ran. I ran for my dear life.

The massacre was the final jolt that the communist party needed, and Gerő and his ministry were forced to resign. Late afternoon came the resignation and jubilation, the ceasefire. It was a fantastic elated feeling. We thought the revolution was a success.

Then, on the 3rd of November, about 9 o'clock in the evening, I had a rifle on my shoulder and I was walking down Andrásy boulevard. From the other side of the street came a very well known communist. He said to me, 'Throw away that toy and deny that you ever carried it. Tomorrow morning, the Russians will come, they will re-invade the country.'

I couldn't believe what he was saying.



**GYÖNGYI  
GULYÁS**

Office worker,  
Győr

On the 4th of November, the whole family was devastated. It was so terrible. Russian tanks were going past our front windows. The children didn't understand much about it, they just said 'Mummy why are you crying?' 'Daddy what are those tanks doing here?' The whole house shook, there were hundreds of tanks.

I was ready to die with my children or die getting them to freedom. My husband didn't want to go. He said 'I can't be responsible to take four children between 8 and 3 months into the unknown with just the clothes on our back. How could I do that?'

I said 'We have to leave because you will be arrested, I will be sacked. What will we do then? We must leave.'

The saddest memory I have about leaving happened when we were sitting on that horse-drawn cart and I was looking down at earth, black earth, ploughed land. As I was looking at that dirt it hit me that I was leaving my homeland, leaving my country. A line of a poem that I love started echoing in my ears 'Here you must live and die, here you must live and die.' This memory haunted me for the rest of my life. I looked down in my arms at my three-month-old daughter and I thought 'For my children I have to leave.'



# Leaving Hungary

The world looked on in horror as Prime Minister Imre Nagy announced the Soviet attack on Hungary and broadcast calls for international help. Help never came.

The exodus of political refugees began. Many ran for their lives, others ran for freedom and a better life.



## SUSAN KISS

Teacher, Sótöny

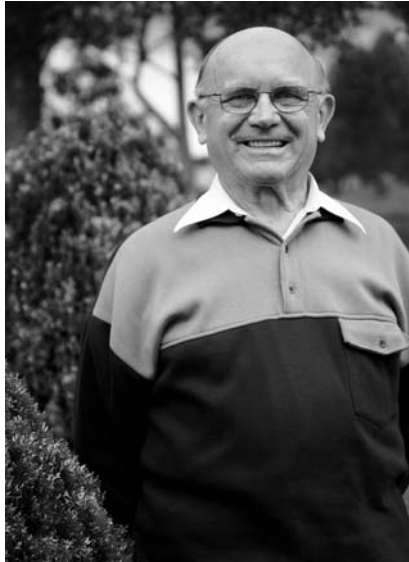
**I had a 2 month old son.**

He was with my parents at the time, and I couldn't bring him because I was crossing the border on my own.

I told my parents when I said goodbye 'As soon as I get a place I will let you know through the radio.' As soon as they knew I was safe, they would bring my son over.

It was terrible leaving but I had no choice. My parents and I thought when I was safe in Austria that I could go back and get my son, or that my parents could bring my son to me. I knew it would be a little while before we could go and visit. It was an awful feeling, leaving him there. Not a person there had dry eyes. Nobody. Saying goodbye to our homeland was so hard.

Then the communists completely closed the borders again and mum and dad were too scared to bring my son over. I couldn't get back. My son was 21 when I saw him again.



## FRANK MERKLI

Hotel Korona, Szentgotthárd

**Szentgotthárd is close to both the Austrian and Yugoslavian borders.**

At first my fiancée, Piroska, and I got lost. We were actually inside Yugoslavia for a few hundred metres. When I realised, we turned and crossed back into Hungary. We were exhausted, we collapsed underneath trees in a small forest. Some people at a farmhouse gave us breakfast and blankets. The woman said 'Tomorrow morning I will take you across.'

We walked at night with the woman. She said 'Make sure when you are in Austria that you hide in a cellar, because quite often the border guards come over and take people back.'

We were close to the border when we looked back and discovered a couple of border guards with Alsatian dogs coming after us. I said to my fiancée 'Drop everything, we have to run.'



## EMILIA TORDY

Dairy worker, Budapest

**My sister, her husband, my girlfriend and I left together.**

On the way to the train station, we went past Chain Bridge, with its lions on either side, and I said 'Goodbye lions, you will not see us for a while.'

It was the 21st of November, snowing and frosty. We walked and walked. When we got to the border, we saw the Austrian flag and the Hungarian flag. Many of us laid down and kissed the Hungarian ground goodbye.



# 1956 Olympic Games team

## **CECILIA BURKE**

**Kayaker, 1956 Melbourne Olympics**

**It was very, very difficult trying to concentrate on the Games while I was worried about my husband and my child in Budapest.**

I asked some of our leaders if they could get in touch with my family. They said they could, and that everybody was all right, that my son was safe.

It was the end of December by the time I got back, my husband had left. He was involved in fighting in Budapest and he left because it would have been dangerous for him to stay in Budapest. He also wanted to be in a free country.

I thought our son would have a better chance if his parents were together, so I went after my husband. As soon as we were together in England, we tried to get our son back. I was allowed to apply every six months, and every six months my application was rejected. Every six months, it was awful. I was sometimes in despair, I didn't know whether I would ever see him, I was very upset. Almost every night, I dreamt about my son and getting him out from Hungary. That went on for six years, until finally we got our son out.



## **ZOLTÁN SZIGETI**

**Kayaker, 1956 Melbourne Olympics**

There were a lot of people who suddenly didn't want to come to the Olympics. They wanted to stay in Hungary to fight for their country.

Some team members took part in the revolution. The shooters were good at that. They left in the morning and then came back later in the afternoon. They said they had had some shooting practice.

Then we came to Australia for the Olympics. It should have been a really beautiful time of my life, and to some extent it was. But the problems back in Hungary and the problems with Russian occupation took the fun away to a large extent.

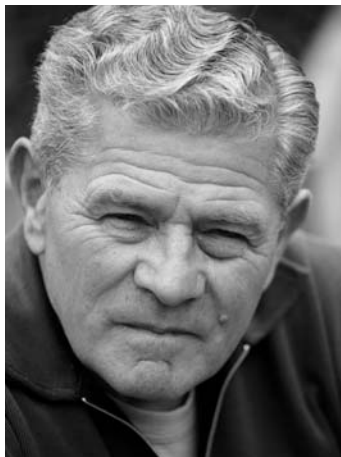
I liked it here. It seemed like a promising and exciting new life, compared with the no-hope situation back in Hungary. No-one was overjoyed when I said that I was staying in Australia, it was very emotional. It was a difficult decision to make.

# Here in Australia

56 Faces is being expanded during 2007 to include the stories and memories of 56ers throughout Victoria.



**ÁRPÁD BUZÁSSY**  
Student, Baja



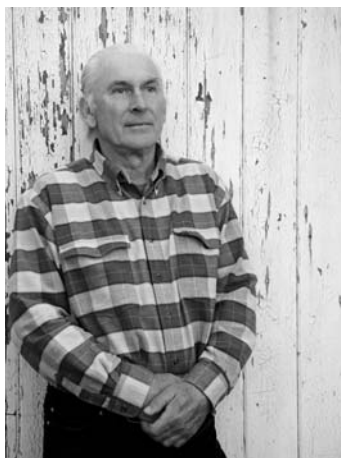
**ISTVAN KOVÁCS**  
Student, Budapest



**STEVE ZSIGMOND**  
Coalmine worker, Balinka



**SÁNDOR GURBAN**  
Cadet agronomist,  
Hajdúdorog



**FRANCIS STANEK**  
Apprentice cabinetmaker,  
Budapest



**HELEN AND ZOLTÁN  
KÖVESS**  
Guest house for 56ers,  
Melbourne

**It was the best thing in my life, that I ended up here.  
I'm really grateful for the country, it gave me the chance  
to succeed, to achieve what we achieved as a family.**

– VID JURICKAY

200,000 Hungarians fled after the Soviets attacked on 4 November, escaping over the border into Austria or Yugoslavia. The majority of political refugees entered the free world through Austria.

14,000 of those political refugees came to Australia.



**Freedom meant so much to me.**

It's dearer than blood, it's more than anything else in the whole world.

**JÓZSEF MONEK**

Political prisoner, freedom fighter

On 23 October 1956 the Hungarian secret police opened fire on unarmed demonstrators outside the Budapest Radio Station. Many years of hatred of Soviet-style oppression and a brutal secret police exploded and an uprising was born.

After five days of bloodshed, Hungarians danced in the streets as the Soviets agreed

to withdraw and Hungary declared an independent government. The euphoria evaporated on 4 November, when the Soviets crushed the uprising with a massive show of armed force.

50 years on, Victorians explain why the uprising was a catalyst for coming to Australia, some running for their lives, others running for a better life and freedom.

## 56 FACES

*Memories of Hungary 1956*

**Interviews** Sandy Watson • 0401 714 880

**Photography** Susan Gordon-Brown • 0407 366 332

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