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# 1956 Hungarian Revolution: Lasting Impacts From a Violent Backlash Against Foreign

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## ABSTRACT:

This poster presents the third chapter in my book *Chorus of Experiences Capturing Moments in Time: From the Siege of Budapest to Goulash Populism* that uses oral histories of senior Hungarian women to explore the past and the present. The 1956 Revolution in Hungary can be seen as a populist movement in response to the harsh Rákosi Era, and a response against the foreign occupation of the Russian Communists. I use both Ada and Zsófia's stories to set up the cultural context of the period. Whereas Ada tells a powerful emotional story of loss, Zsófia more methodically outlines the series of events that occurred. These two stories are followed by the perspectives of others to more fully contextualize the experience and look at how the 1956 revolution fits a general pattern of populism as an expression of backlash against a foreign presence and as a means to regain control.

## METHODOLOGY

I use a person-centered approach to collect life histories to allow the respondent to lead the direction of the interview asking follow up questions to build on their responses (Hollan 2001). For six consecutive summers (2011-2016) I selected women over the age of 65 to tell their life stories in order to understand living in the socialist period compared to the post socialist period. Most of the older women of my study do not speak English, and all interviews were conducted in Hungarian. I decided to not only make audio recordings of my interviews, but also video recordings. This enabled me to refer back to the interviews multiple times as often in any interview some information might be overlooked the first time. Most of the women I met due to my connections to Hungarian immigrants in the United States as they would ask me to carry gifts back to their mother's back home. Others I met through the snow-ball approach relying on a few reliable Hungarian friends to introduce me to people they knew. Along with the standards of informed consent, I use pseudonyms in this book to protect their identity. As with any group one studies, some women I formed continuing close bonds with, while others I met with more briefly. My approach to presenting the stories relies on my wish to highlight specific stories to create a framework, and then add a chorus, the multiple layers and perspectives of others, to show complexity.

## INTRODUCTION

The wreaths were smaller than I expected, faded and weathered from the past year. Ada had given detailed instructions on how to find them, "Take the street car to János Kórház, walk up Kútvolgyi street, go towards the nursery there is a tennis court and they are on a fence on the left side, three small wreaths." But still they were hard to find, we walked past them into the field when a man coaching a tennis class asked if we needed help. Familiar with the story he knew exactly what we were talking about and walked us back to the fence. As we took photographs several older women in the apartment across the street, leaned over their balconies in curiosity, if not the typical nosiness of most former communist apartment buildings. One lady believed the wreaths were for some people who died from a helicopter accident trying to land with a patient in the field behind the hospital. When we tried to explain the real story about the three people shot here, she did not seem to believe us. When I later told Ada, she shook her head. She recalls that in 1956 they went afterwards to this very site and the weather had been so cold that she could still see her dead brother's blood frozen on the gravel. Once a year, on the anniversary of their death, she and her children go to place new wreaths, and no one removes them from the fence for the year. This is the spot where the Russians murdered her younger brother, her stepfather, and a friend during the 1956 revolution.

The impression I get from the multiple stories that contribute to the retelling of the 1956 revolution, are parallels to themes during the World War II and the Siege of Budapest: tales of hiding, fear, and famine. It also marks a period of mass exodus as many emigrated out of Hungary. After the 1956 protests, history books and lessons taught to students erased this event, so as to silence that a revolution ever occurred. However, following the 1956 revolution marked a dramatic change in the manner in which Communist rule preceded in what is called the Kádár era. This erasure of history ferments in the minds of those who lived through it. I use Ada's emotional story to bookend this chapter, as a start and closure, but use Zsófia's detailed description of the October revolution to then jumpstart the incorporation of other people's stories to draw out common themes. In concluding this chapter, I expand on how these events give insight into populist movements particularly as an example of a mass uprising against the oppressive Rákosi regime.

## ADA'S STORY

Ada's story can give insight into the experience of the 1956 revolution and how it has influenced her perspective today. As I was reviewing photographs to incorporate in this chapter, I was struck by the many images of make-shift graves on the streets. People had carefully covered the bodies of the protesters with wreaths, flowers, and Hungarian flags. Some had their identification cards gently placed on top so as to identify the body. However, they left the mangled Russian bodies to rot on the streets. I started this chapter with Ada's wreaths that she puts on a fence every year to honor the death of her stepfather and younger brother. Here now she describes how her younger brother and step father were murdered during the 1956 revolution:

"Meanwhile my brother graduated from school and came to work at the Hungarian Optical Factory (A Magyar Optikai Művek – MOM). He loved it, he was a kind brother. I was the boy in the family, I would defend him, and I used my fists. So, he was a kind good person. He was also in the MOM. I was afraid, because I believed he would be like me, but he wasn't



He went to night school, so he was a very good boy, and we loved each other very much. My mother got married again - alas - it was not a lucky choice, and we did not like the second husband, who was actually a very smart guy, but when he drank, it was awful, it was unbearable. If he were sober, he did not like to work. He was a divorced man, and did not pay their child support, and never gave us money. He was constantly kicked out from here and there. Otherwise, he had finished Ludoviká (The Royal Hungarian Military Training School), so he was an absolute smart guy. In World War II he almost died".

She goes on to describe the chaotic nature of events, as they simply did not know what was going on, or what had happened to her brother and stepfather:

"On November 8, 1956, my stepfather, my stepfather's brother, and my brother did not come home. We thought they had defected, but that's not what happened. At the time, they were just a driver and passenger who wanted to move the car. When the Russians came back on November 4, there was a looting period. He wanted to take the car away from the front of the house and the Russians captured them near the János Hospital by a near bye football field, and executed them, they shot all three of them. So, it was very difficult to survive. My brother was seventeen and a half years old, my step-father was a Museum curator, he never had a gun in his life, he couldn't even catch a ball. They were absolutely civilized people. And there wasn't any fighting over by János Hospital, and yet it happened".

She explains these were people who were not involved in the protests, and in fact, the area where they were killed was not near the major hot points of revolt, as they were 7 to 8 miles away from the Nemzeti Múzeum, or the Corvin. She goes on to describe the funeral:

"They covered my brother with the national flag colors. The CEO from work called me and gave us separate money for the funeral. This was really something terrible, this triple funeral! I had to walk up to the Farkasrét cemetery, there was no other form of transport. They were such makeshift coffins, and my brother was not covered, so someone jumped in front of my mother so she wouldn't see, but I saw the side of my brother's face was missing. We walked up the path there - ever since I go there every year on November 8th. In fact, there was not any I have missed! On November 8, there was nothing going on (related to the '56 revolution). And then a nurse called out - there was a nurse dormitory - and she asked if we were relatives. We said yes. The woman sobbed, that she watched the whole thing from the window. Since then, we would go up there at the same time with my husband, and then now with my children, there with Frigyes and Adaka, where the steps start, but at 8 o'clock, we're always there, to leave wreaths, and they are there for a year. No one removes them from the fence. Interesting. This year I was out there in November and replaced the wreath. And we lit a candle. We can do nothing else. I would be very ashamed of myself if I'll ever forget this in life. Because this cannot be!"

I asked her if she found out who killed her brother, but unfortunately, they had little information about her brother and stepfather's circumstances, but she did learn from the Nurse that they had been shot by the Russians.

"And it is still not clear to me as to why, you know. This was a decisive moment for my whole life. I just cried and cried for a year. So, it was terrible."

She recognizes how this experience has shaped her perceptions today, especially her political views and support of the Fidesz party. Every time a Communist politician from the Hungarian Socialist Party (Magyar Szocialista Párt or MSZP) comes on the television she shakes her fists at the "Komcsis" (Commies).

## CONCLUSION: A Revolt Against Oppression and Foreign Occupation

The events of 1956 highlight common themes such as censorship, and blame. During the Rákosi era the government took control of the media, and banned the international radio. Reka could not bear to listen to the propaganda on the radio. The government also alters history in textbooks, as Leila complains in the Rákosi era, but also no one could talk about 1956 until after 1989. Another trend includes blame: blaming the Jews in World War II, blaming the Russians for the Rákosi era.

This event clearly shows a strong response to foreign occupation. Hungary has a long history of foreign occupation from the Turkish, to Austrians. The 1956 Revolution shows a revolt against Russian occupation. This trope of revulsion of foreign omnipotence surfaces with Goulash populism as will be further discussed in the final chapter. I want to stress this chapter illustrates not just another form of populist movement, but also how dramatic events can play a role in people's perceptions of present day society.