



A scene along Buckeye Road, Cleveland. Its Hungarian population has dwindled deeply.

The New York Times/Gary Seltie

New York Times
1975 May 24



Hungarians Recall Transition

Rebel 'Fifty-Sixers' See Self-Reliance as Prime Virtue

By WILLIAM K. STEVENS

Special to The New York Times

CLEVELAND—Steve Menyhart, an American citizen and confirmed suburbanite, used to be Istvan Menyhart, a Hungarian rebel. He remembers well what it was like in the beginning of his new life in the United States after he fled his homeland in 1956, when Soviet troops crushed the Hungarian revolt. Unable to speak English and largely helpless at that time, Mr. Menyhart says today, "You felt like a baby who don't know nothing."

Now it is all coming back, called forth and sharpened by the spectacle of the tens of thousands of South Vietnamese who have fled their country as political exiles. And so these are days of empathy among the 40,000 "Fifty-Sixers," as they call themselves, the determined group of Hungarian refugees that, in the last 18 years, has become thoroughly integrated into the fabric of American life.

Not for Steve Menyhart is the hostility of Americans who would turn the Vietnamese away. "I welcome them," he says. So, apparently, do many other Fifty-Sixers.

'Everybody Felt Bad'

A few days ago, the Vietnamese refugees were the main topic of conversation at a memorial mass here in Cleveland's Hungarian community—the biggest in the country—for the late Cardinal Mindszenty, the Hungarian national hero. "Everybody felt very, very bad for the Vietnamese," said Dr. Istvan Luczek, a Fifty-Sixer who is now an obstetrician here.

Most Have Become
Americanized and
Have Prospered



Steve Menyhart, who was called Istvan before he fled from Hungary to the U.S., works in his uncle's store in Cleveland.



Mr. Menyhart's uncle, Alex, who is president of Cleveland's United Hungarian Societies, says that, while things have not moved very far yet, he is "pretty sure" that Hungarian groups here will want to become sponsors for Vietnamese refugee families, just as they did for their own in 1956.

So far, though, only three such families have come to public notice in Cleveland. Most remain far away in the South or on the West Coast or in Guam. For the moment, then, the Fifty-Sixers can only remember how it was then and appreciate how it is now.

Vivid Memories

Vivid again in Steve Menyhart's mind's eye is the 1956 rebellion itself, in which tens of thousands of his countrymen died; the tension and anxiety of living in a police state where the smallest aspects of behavior were closely watched, and where dissent brought imprisonment and hard labor; the excitement of taking part, as a young law student in Szeged, Hungary's third largest city, in the revolution's street demonstrations; the disillusionment at the rebellion's failure; the decision to escape; the fear of being caught and possibly sent to Siberia; the final crawl to the Austrian border across a rain-soaked vineyard with Russian flares bursting all around, and then leaving the Iron Curtain behind with cries of "Freedom! Freedom!"

That was Dec. 13, 1956. Today, Steve Menyhart works as a salesman in his uncle's plumbing supply store on Cleveland's West Side. He has a happy life in a neat yellow-brick house in the pleasantly old-shoe suburb of Lakewood on the city's northwest border, less than two miles from the Lake Erie shore.

Goulash at Cookouts

There he and his wife, Eva, also a Fifty-Sixer, tend the lawn, make Hungarian goulash at backyard cookouts, care for a 5-year-old

son and a teen-aged daughter, and in general live like millions of other Americans.

If assimilation into the society at large means making it, then the Fifty-Sixers have made it. That, to many of them, calls for appreciation, an appreciation that some Hungarians believe many native Americans do not feel for their homeland.

"This is the greatest country on earth," Mr. Menyhart says. "I was in 14 countries before I came here, and this one gives you the most opportunity like an individual."

4,000 in Cleveland

He had to give up becoming a lawyer to get here, but he has no regrets. "Freedom means more than to be a lawyer," he said. Besides, one could not match the American standard of living in Hungary "even if you worked for 50 years," he added.

Of the 200,000 Fifty-Sixers who left Hungary and the 40,000 of those who came to the United States, 4,000 to 5,000 settled in Cleveland, where they found many relatives among the 100,000 Hungarians already here.

As a group they were young (roughly 18 to 40), well educated (many were teachers, doctors, engineers and students), and potentially a valuable asset to the nation.

For many, like Steve Menyhart, becoming a refugee meant sacrificing some hopes and expectations. Many traded status and career for liberty. Arriving in the United States, they found themselves severely hamstrung by the language problem. In many instances, that meant taking a menial job at first.

In the beginning, many Hungarian refugees settled in a classic ethnic enclave—some 40,000 strong at the time—along Buckeye Road on the city's near southeast side. There, many of them clung to the familiar culture. They went to Hungarian butchers and grocery stores, mixed mostly with Hungarians and took their time about becoming citizens.

'This Country's First'

Mr. Menyhart and others did not think that was the way to go about it. "If you come to this country," he told some friends, "you should learn the language and you should become an American citizen. In your

heart you can be a good Hungarian, but this country's first."

So he went to school four nights a week to learn English. He taught himself three to five new English words a day. He learned the plumbing business. Gradually, the anxiety left and the self-confidence returned. He became a citizen in five years. Some took longer than Mr. Menyhart, but ultimately, most followed his course.

The Hungarians proclaim self-reliance as a prime virtue. Eva Menyhart sums it up: "Nobody can do what you can do for yourself."

Gradually, relying on the help of relatives and then increasingly on themselves, the Fifty-Sixers made their way in business, the professions and the factories.

Moved to the Suburbs

As a rule, they prospered and became members of the middle class—with all that has come to mean in the United States. Drawn by the promise of privacy, green grass and trees, disturbed by the influx of blacks and the rising incidence of crime along Buckeye Road, they moved to the suburbs.

Today, the Hungarian population along Buckeye Road is perhaps a tenth of what it was. The sign that says "Fenz Kuldes Hajo Yegy—steamship tickets," is faded. A restaurant advertising Hungarian cooking is boarded up. Across from the cathedral-style church of St. Elizabeth's, where Cardinal Mindszenty said mass last year, cheerful black women cook ribs on an outdoor grill.

Like any ethnic group, the Hungarians still tend to mix with one another to some degree, but not only with each other. Dispersed as they are throughout the metropolitan area, their lives seem to have merged in spirit with that of the larger society.

Thoroughly American

In almost all other respects, the Menyharts seem to have become thoroughly American. Midwestern suburban style. While they believe that blacks have been discriminated against and say that this must be corrected, they are opposed to busing to achieve school integration. Having worked hard to get where they are, they do not admire those who they believe do not work hard.

The Menyharts, fearing and disliking Communism, believe that the United States should have stuck by South Vietnam. Mr. Menyhart, who carried signs on behalf of the Hungarian revolution, says it looks to him as though America's antiwar demonstrators were marching for Communism.

Like Dr. Luczek, other Hungarians have mixed feelings. To him, the Hungarian revolution was a nationalistic rebellion directed against the dominance of an outside power that happened to be Communist, while it was the Communists who were carrying the spirit of nationalism in Vietnam.

The Menyharts and Dr. Luczek agree on one basic point: "I can tell you," Dr. Luczek said, "that the United States are still the best."

