

1975

# 'We Have Been Exploited'

FENYVESI

IMRE

1.

THE WASHINGTON POST

Sunday, July 13, 1975

By Haynes Johnson

This is another in a series of periodic articles about American life today. Today's article examines what has happened to one of the couples aboard a flight of 42 immigrants from Eastern Europe, as reported in The Post last March.

**M**ONROE, N.Y. — There had been a letter, in Hungarian, in neat script.

Perhaps you remember us: you interviewed us on our way from an Austrian camp to New York. We'd very much like to see a copy of the report you wrote.

We have been living here in New York for the past two and a half months. My husband works here in a factory for \$4.80 an hour. We have been struggling a lot because we have been exploited quite a bit, but there are also good results. We have passed our exams in English and we now have driving licenses. We also bought a car. Please accept our apologies for writing in Hungarian but perhaps there will be somebody who translates our letter for you. Unfortunately, we don't know enough English to write a letter. But we are trying hard.

Thank you for your efforts in advance.

Yours respectfully,

The American  
Experience

The return address had said Box 690, Rt. 1, Monroe, N.Y., but the waitress at the coffee shop, the bartender at the Hungry Lion, the gasoline attendant at the Gulf Station—do not know where they live. Out in the country somewhere. No listing in the directory. A neighbor, who answers a call, knows of them, but is only able to give vague instructions in halting English. Something about West Monbasha Road beyond the fire house on the lake.

Lake Monbasha is a small jewel in the mountains some 10 miles north of the Jersey-New York border and another 10 to 15 miles west of the Hudson and the Harriman State Park. The road from Monroe winds through thick woods until it straightens out by the lake. Cottages line the shore. Clusters of mail boxes stand along the road. Box 690 bears the name "Fenyvesi."

"Fenyvesi? Fenyvesi?" says a man tending his lawn. "I think that's the new guy. Up the road, on the hill, around the left. Green house on the top."

Imre Fenyvesi has just come home from work, "10 mile far," in Sloatsburg. "Hello, hello," he says, with

a smile. "Come in. Come in." His wife, Ilona, joins us, also smiling. I am the first visitor to their small, Spartanly furnished, but immaculately neat home. And the first, it develops later, to ask how they are adjusting to American life. Soon we are seated at a table, eating a goulash dinner. "You like?" Ilona says, hesitantly. I like. "Sugar, you no like the sugar?" Imre inquires. "Too sweet? I like the sugar." He stirs his goulash. Then: "You stay with us. Here, tonight. You our guest."

During dinner, and later in the evening, the Fenyvesis talk about their experiences. They are apologetic about their English: they understand, they keep saying, but they find it difficult to speak. As the evening wears on, though, they relax and become more confident. We are able to carry on an extended conversation. When I had last seen them, four and a half months ago, neither could speak a word of English.





Kedves Y. L. von Ur!

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Fáradozását előre is köszönöm.

Tisztelettel Fenyvesi Imre  
Ilona



The Fenyvesis, both in their late 20s, both from Budapest, had spent their first night in America in the Latham, a dingy Manhattan hotel on East 28th Street. They had studied their Hungarian-English dictionary in their room that night, but it didn't help them. The next morning, as a six-inch snowstorm buffeted New York, they had set out on foot to find the two addresses far uptown to which they had been directed—the Social Security office, to obtain their necessary papers, and the private agency which had sponsored them on their trip from Austria to America. The Fenyvesis got lost and had to be driven to the agency office by a New York police cruiser. Once there, they found the employment prospects bleak. There was a chance, they were told, they might be able to work for a couple in Boston. They didn't know where Boston was. It was upsetting, but they would wait and see. They would take any kind of work available. Even after 24 hours in the new country, they were certain about one point: they were anxious to leave New York.

"New York," Imre said then, through a translator, "is too big. Everything is too big."

They were to find New York even more difficult before they left. The job in Boston never materialized. After waiting in the Latham for work in his field—Imre was a locksmith in Hungary—and seeing their meager savings dwindle, the Fenyvesis were told of a job by the agency that had sponsored them. They were to be housekeepers for a large foreign-born family, the husband Czech, the wife French, in an expensive apartment area in the East 70's, just off Central Park.

It was a disillusioning experience. "People no good, job no good," Imre says, simply and succinctly. They were taken advantage of—in the words of Ilona, they were exploited. They worked from 6 o'clock in the morning until 10 o'clock in the evening, seven days a week. For this they were paid a flat rate of \$150 a month—not for each of them, but a collective salary as a couple.



While in New York Imre and Ilona, who are Catholic, began going to a Hungarian-American church. Through a priest they were told of someone who might help them. A Mr. Apartini, on Second Avenue, uptown. He is connected with a Hungarian travel bureau. He also gives regular radio broadcasts, in Hungarian, aimed at emigres in the New York metropolitan area. Imre and Ilona met him, described their needs and skills, and were mentioned on a subsequent broadcast.

George Krenner happened to be listening to the radio one night here in Monroe, when he heard about the Fenyvesis. Krenner, 62, is himself a Hungarian immigrant; he came here some 20 years ago. Now he lives in one of the cottages overlooking Lake Monbasha, surrounded by his own children and their families in adjoining homes. He plans to retire at the end of this year from his job as a toolmaker in Sloatsburg. He knew there was an opening for an apprentice—and he also had a small home behind his own that he would like to rent.

Krenner called the Fenyvesis in New York. Imre and Ilona were ecstatic. Their problems, it seemed, were behind them. Krenner sent his son to pick them up in New York and drive them back to Monroe. Early in the spring they left New York, threaded their way north through the Manhattan traffic, crossed the Hudson and headed west across the mountains to begin their new life in Monroe.

THERE ARE NO second acts in American lives, Scott Fitzgerald once wrote. A fine line, but incorrect. For people like the Fenyvesis life in America is a succession of acts, minor and major, serious and frivolous, humorous and grim. Nothing is predictable.

The job is fine. Imre is doing well. "I hope Imre likes us as much as we like him," says his boss. "He had a future with us." Imre often leaves at 6 o'clock for the factory in Sloatsburg "ten mile far." He has joined the union. Fifty dollars initiation fee, \$25 a year in dues. He started



at \$4.70 an hour, got a 10-cent-an-hour raise, and goes up another 10 cents in September. He makes a point, proudly, of showing the increase on his pay check.

Ilona listens intently, then gets up from the table. She goes to another room and comes back with a ledger, the kind you buy in a dime store. On it she carefully writes down each week's salary in two sections, one "englis" the other "hungary." The phrases and initials are bewildering to them; the rest of us take these bureaucratic intrusions in our lives for granted: "period ending..... fed with tax..... f.i.c.a..... state withhold..... s.u.i..... gross pay..... net pay." Imre is making \$231.48 a week, exclusive of overtime. After deductions his take-home pay is \$191.91.

To impoverished immigrants, who came to America from a refugee camp near Vienna full of fears and hopes, that \$12,000 annual income seems an affirmation of the stories they had heard, and had told each other, while in Europe. Imre and Ilona thought so, too, at first. After their deductions, their rent of \$150 a month, their utilities (excluding the phone they don't have), their food, clothing and other essential expenses, they were still able to save. Now they find themselves virtually without a penny. The reason has less to do with the job than with the more personal side of their American experience.

Imre explains the problem by saying: "In Hungary there is good people. Here is also good people. But only American people good. Hungarian people no good. Every American good man, but Hungarian man no good man. Here Hungary people, envious—envious? you understand?—if come new Hungarian people. They don't want you here."

After Imre and Ilona came to Monroe and began paying their rent, they found themselves cut off, far in the country. They expected help from those who, like themselves, had made the difficult transition from Europe to America. Those, indeed, who were now living around them. They received none—no offers of assistance, no contact from anyone. They have done everything on their own.



Every Saturday, in fair weather or foul, they would leave their home and walk the five or more miles to Monroe to do their weekly shopping. "We walk walk walk every weekend because nobody help." Then, groceries and supplies in hand, they would take a taxi back to the country. It became intolerable. They needed their own transportation.

Imre saw a car at a gas station. It was a white, old Ford Falcon. For sale. When he had enough cash, he bought it for \$600. It was a lemon. "Motor no good, tires no good, brakes no good. I change. You understand?" Another \$400 for an engine, \$120 for tires and brakes. Imre did the work himself. "Now is good."

Despite what they said in their letter, the Fenyvesis do not yet have driver's licenses. They studied hard to master enough English to get learner's permits, but they have not yet received their licenses. At the moment their single most important goal is to get those licenses. Then Ilona can begin looking for work herself. Then they will be mobile. Then they will be independent.

They are still working hard at that task. To demonstrate, Imre picks up a booklet and slowly reads aloud in English:

"Who must have a driver's license in New York State? A person may not operate a motor vehicle or motorcycle on public highways unless he has a valid learner—learner's—permit. In addition, the operator must operate only the type of vehicle for which he is licensed. For example, if he has a class five license, his operation is restricted to automobiles and trucks of less than 80,000 pounds."

He stumbles over only one word—learner's. The rest is letter perfect.

When Imre and Ilona left Vienna for the flight to New York they carried with them a small Hungarian-English dictionary. They were reading it on the plane. In New York they bought another dictionary, a paperback. Their "Handbook for Hungarians" was published in 1937 as a service for refugees who came here after the bloody up-



rising against Russian rule. It was published in New York by something called Free Europe Press, a division of the Free Europe Committee. Undoubtedly, CIA money was involved. How it came to be published means nothing to Imre and Ilona. They are not into the politics of the moment. Or politics of any kind, for that matter. Their new dictionary is far better than the old. It is indispensable. They study it every night and every weekend. It is their teacher, their classroom, their school.

Imre now says he commands an English vocabulary of 800 words. He repeats this figure several times. He knows exactly because he and Ilona drill themselves on specific words and phrases. Ilona keeps a running log book of words they are studying, one column for the English words, the other for the Hungarian translation. It is now quite long.

During the day she occupies her time in another fashion. She keeps on the black-and-white TV set they bought for \$150 and listens intently to the soap operas, quiz and talk shows that fill the screen hour after hour. As she listens, she jots down words in another notebook and then searches for the translation. Her words-off-TV log now is arranged in sections beginning with the A's down to the Z's: brain, brag, brace, brake, bracelet, boom, burn.

"Some time next year speaking good English," Imre says. He stops, smiles shyly, shrugs as if to dismiss what might have seemed a boast, and says: "Not good English, but middle, I hope." Then, the pride again: "When first we met we no speak English."

**I**N THE PARLANCE of the news business, the Fenyvesis are what is called "soft." They offer no great clues about the direction of the country, nor can they speak authoritatively about our politics, our economy, our international relations, our form of government. Even as immigrants they are invisible in the ebb and flow of today's "significant" national news. No organizations were formed to assist and relocate them on their arrival. No reporters or TV cameras were there to record their story. No politicians met their plane, as in the case of the Vietnamese who came here after them. They are merely among the latest in that line of immigrants struggling to adapt to a strange land and an alien culture.

During his travels around the America of 140 years ago, de Tocqueville was struck by the pioneers he met in some distant backwoods.





9

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*Television helps Imre and Ilona Fenyvesi learn English.*



"We entered the log house," he wrote of one of his encounters. "The inside is quite unlike the cottages of the peasantry of Europe: it contains more than is superfluous, less than is necessary. A single window with a muslin blind; on a hearth of trodden clay an immense fire, which lights the whole structure; above the hearth a good rifle, a deer's skin, and plumes of eagles' feathers; on the right hand of the chimney a map of the United States raised and shaken by the wind through the cran- nies in the wall; near the map, upon a shelf formed of roughly hewn planks, a few volumes of books—a Bible, the six first books of Milton, and two of Shakespeare; along the wall, trunks instead of closets; in the center of the room a rude table, with legs of green wood, and with the bark still upon them, looking as if they grew out of the ground on which they stood..."

He described the inhabitants as belonging to "that restless, calculating, adventurous group of men who . . . endure the life of savages for a time, in order to conquer and civilize the backwoods."

The Fenyevisis' living conditions are certainly less primitive and physically dangerous, but at this point in their personal odyssey they share another trait that De Tocqueville observed. "In the bosom of this obscure democracy, which has as yet brought forth neither generals, nor philosophers, nor authors," he wrote, "a man might stand up and pronounce a fine definition of liberty."

Imre struggles to express his impressions of America so far.

"In Hungary no good because many restrictions," he says. "There is no liberty in Hungary. It has, America, liberty. You understand?"

The Fenyevisis' are uncertain about their future, but they have a familiar goal. Once they get their driver's licenses, once they master their English, they want to be on the move. They plan to go to California.

"We listen many good things about San Francisco," Imre says. "We see in Vienna movie of San Francisco. I would find another job in San Francisco if somebody would help."

Whatever troubles they have encountered, nothing has happened so far to make them doubt their decision to immigrate.

"We go to California," Imre says. "Every American will help."