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What happened when a Canadian-Hungarian family yielded to the alluring propaganda to live behind the Iron Curtain

THE FAMILY THAT CAME BACK

Condensed from Liberty Canada

George May

TROUBLE for the Biro family began in 1947 when a newcomer moved in next door to Tony Biro's barbershop in Vancouver, B.C. Whenever Tony had a free minute, the neighbor, a Hungarian, would appear in the doorway and begin one of his wondrous tales of life in Red Hungary. Sometimes he came in with books and magazines. "Look at this," he would say ecstatically, pointing at a photograph. "A nursery for children of factory workers! Did you hear of anything like that before the war?"

Tony was interested. His wife and two boys were native Canadians, but he had been born in the former Austro-Hungarian empire, and he still had relatives in Hungary. Urged by his new neighbor, Tony joined the Canadian-Hungarian Workers' Club and attended its plays, dances and lectures.

It was at a lecture meeting that Tony heard Joseph Balogh speak about the new Hungary. Balogh had migrated to Canada between the wars but returned to Budapest in 1948. The Communists soon sent him back to Canada on a speaking tour. He was persuasive. He had seen the miracle with his own eyes, and now he urged Canadian Hungarians to go back to their homeland with their new skills, their tools and their money. "Hungary is a land of opportunity, and it needs you!"

Increasingly now, Tony began to run into people who were "going

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back." In the summer of 1950 he and his wife, Helen, decided to join them.

Tony sold his barbershop, packed his equipment and took $10,000 out of his savings account. With Helen and their two sons, Dick, 11, and Jimmy, 2½, he headed first for England. The Hungarian consul there permitted them to keep their Canadian passports, and gave them a Hungarian "travel document."

At the Hungarian border Red officials checked their papers and searched their baggage — and the entire empty train — for two hours. The Biros watched in dismay. They never expected the doors of paradise to be so zealously guarded.

Arriving in Budapest, the Biros and a group of other recent repatriates were greeted by Balogh with a speech. "Hungary welcomes her children back. If you ever need help, come to my office. Our job is to help you."

The Biros went to a State hotel for their first night, and were charged $16.50 for their room. Even before they unpacked their bags, a clerk gave them a piece of advice: "Don't talk! You never know who the other person might be!"

Next morning, when Helen went downstairs to order breakfast, she was told she would have to shop for it. The desk clerk wrote out for her in Hungarian the things she wanted for the children — bread, milk, butter, jam, fruit juice — and sent her to the nearest State store. There an untidy salesgirl sold her a slab of bread, and sent her to another shop for milk. The salesgirls laughed and shook their heads when Helen kept pointing at the words "jam" and "butter" on her list.

That morning, when Tony deposited his Canadian money with the National Bank, he was told that he could take out only forints at the rate of 11 forints per Canadian dollar. At this exchange it cost the Biros more than $8 to buy the simplest "people's menu" meal at a restaurant.

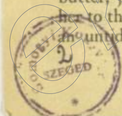
Next, Tony went apartment-hunting. When he could find nothing, he headed for Balogh's office. The small waiting room was packed with ex-Canadians, each with a distress story. A woman complained that she had been looking for an apartment for months. A young man said that he was turned down as "an American" wherever he applied for work. "You promised us good jobs here. Where are they?"

Balogh looked helpless. His job had been done when he inveigled all these people to come to Hungary. Now he was a very minor cog in a vast bureaucratic machine.

Within a month Tony and Helen knew they could not remain in Hungary. When Tony reported this to Balogh, the latter said, "Shh. Don't say things like that! You might land in an internment camp! Then what would happen to your family?"

After that came the Long Wait — three years of it.

Tony could find no job for seven



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months. Finally he was allowed to join a barber's coöperative and, by paying $50, to go to work at a barracks for police officers. A good barber, he had earned from $75 to $125 a week in Vancouver. Here he averaged $18, about $3 of which was deducted for such things as subscriptions to Party organs, "voluntary" purchases of State bonds, and so on.

Tony's two great fears were of arrest and of running out of savings. His pay covered barely a third of the family's expenses for food, rent and fuel. "What can you do when eggs cost nearly 40 cents each, a pound of potatoes costs 30 cents and butter is $3 a pound?"

Each morning Helen rose at 4:30 to get to the nearest shop early enough to buy milk. The stores did not open until 6, but there was already a queue waiting when Helen arrived. The people were hungry and sullen. When, occasionally, a woman fainted, she was not allowed to regain her place in the line — it was back to the rear for her. Often, when word spread that the supply of meat or flour was running out, the queue broke into a fierce scramble in which women with infants in their arms were sometimes knocked down.

Housing was so short that some of Budapest's ugliest shacktowns, long condemned as unfit for humans, were more crowded than ever. While denying the shortage, the State recognized it by permitting the payment of "key money." This was a sum paid to a departing tenant for the right to move into his apartment — and the State collected a handsome commission on it.

The Biros "bought the key" to a two-room apartment for $2000, and invested another $200 in essential repairs. The apartment was seldom heated in winter and, when the Biros managed to borrow a small iron stove (none could be bought), Helen had the added chore of queuing up with a bucket for a few pounds of low-quality coal.

Thus life crawled on, with a daily struggle to stay alive and warm. Once a year the "peace loan" committees came around to extort a month's pay. ("Are you for peace or for Wall Street?") Occasionally there were moments of joy: at Christmastime of 1952 oranges were put on sale — at $1.90 a pound.

It was the children who gave Helen and Tony their greatest concern. When Jimmy was four, Helen took him to kindergarten. Though most of the children could not yet read, the propaganda machine did not spare them. There was the usual trinity of portraits — Lenin, Stalin and Hungarian Premier Rakosi. The Red catechism was explained in simple, one-image words: "There is a villain named Wall Street, children, who tries to kill babies and starve their daddies and mummies. Hate him!"

For Dick, school was more rugged yet. Eleven when he entered, he was sufficiently grown up to detect the great lie, and to be afraid. Quickly he found refuge in silence or in

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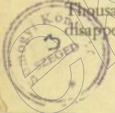
lying. On the second day someone called him an "imperialist." From then on he was the butt of attack and ridicule.

In the school's major subject, politics, Dick was required to learn things he knew from personal experience to be false. The theme was set by two posters: one portrayed an emaciated man, woman and child staring with hungry eyes at a tiny piece of meat, and was labeled "The United States"; the other showed a plump, well-fed family and represented "The Soviet Union."

Only once in Dick's three years in school did a boy rise to challenge a teacher's falsehoods about the West. The teacher quickly squelched him. "The other day," she said meaningfully, "a boy said something like that. He was arrested."

After class, youth groups held political meetings at which speakers talked about "American warmongers." On fear of punishment, Dick marched in the mammoth parades that marked each Soviet anniversary. And, along with all the other boys in the country, he participated in that famous children's game — the throwing of hand grenades. During three years of constant inner conflict Dick came close to a breakdown.

What dwarfed all other fears for the Biros was the police terror. It was doubly monstrous because it was part of the routine of living, something as normal as death. Thousands were arrested; neighbors disappeared and only police seals on their doors betrayed their fate.



On "Black Monday" in May 1951, the police launched a mass deportation of the "subversive" middle class and aged who occupied scarce housing. Police trucks sealed off a street, and then patrols went from house to house, picking up victims. Before the operation ended, between 30,000 and 40,000 persons had been shipped from Budapest to outlying villages.

Most of them gave up quietly. But a few resisted. Tony, barbering at the police officers' barracks, found that many a face he had to shave bore scratches. "You know," an officer told him, "some of these people bare their arms, show the Nazi concentration-camp numbers tattooed on their arms and shout, 'How are you different from the Nazis?' It's foul work, but what can one do?"

The Biros never gave up their struggle to get back to Canada. In January 1951 they went to KEOKH, the Foreign Division of the Secret Police, to ask for exit permits. The officer who questioned them said that the travel document they accepted in London made them Hungarian citizens. He also tried to keep their Canadian passports, but returned them after a heated argument. He finally advised them to go to the Ministry of the Interior and obtain an official statement that they were not Hungarians. As soon as they left him, the Biros deposited their passports at the British legation for safekeeping.

The next step was to draw up the necessary legal papers for the Ministry of the Interior. The Biros found a lawyer willing to do this, but he insisted that they retype all the papers which he drafted. "If they trace this to me, they'll arrest me for helping you go West."

The Biros' application produced no result at the Ministry. They followed up with some 30 letters to the Secret Police, to the Ministry and even to Rakosi. No reply.

The strain was beginning to tell on them. Helen's hair turned gray. Tony lost weight and became nervous. Moreover, he had grown incautious in his denunciations of the regime. Each night the family went to bed fearing a midnight visit from the police.

Along with fear there came financial worry. Their savings were running out.

Then, in May 1953 — in the confusion following the death of Stalin — their hopes were raised: the British Minister was assured that the Biros would be allowed to leave Hungary. Four agonizing months later they suddenly received exit permits.

As soon as word of their departure spread, the Biros were besieged by people anxious to buy their belongings. Even while the Party press ran lyrical reports on the abundance of goods in stores, the people gave it the lie by offering fantastic prices for worn-out clothes, bed linen, pots and pans.

On the train at last, the Biros reached the Austrian border at 11 at night. A swarm of border officials descended on them. The darkened train remained there for four and a half hours — while the four Biros sat in complete silence, each with his own thoughts and fears.

Finally the train began to move. Another half-hour passed, and a new group of uniformed men entered the car. "They are Austrians," cried Helen. As if this were a magic key to their locked-up emotions, the Biros began to laugh and cry and embrace each other. The Austrian officials were sympathetic. Few people came out of Hungary, but those who did always behaved this way.

The Biro family is now back in Vancouver — and trying to become used to the bittersweet joy of it. With money borrowed from Helen's family they bought a beauty shop, which Helen runs. Tony is back at barbering. Dick and Jimmy are in school, and doing well. Dick is happy and cheerful, but will not talk about Hungary. He feels as if it had all been a nightmare one should not try to recall.

Time, work and contentment are driving the past further back for this family. And the other day when I dropped by to visit them I saw a name plate on their door. It read: "Tony and Helen Bennett." I thought I saw in the sign more than a new name. The Biros' last bond with darkness has been severed.