

Faith guided family to freedom 50 years ago

Escape from Budapest following Hungarian revolution follows a 'trail of miracles'

KIRKLAND

By Linda Thomas

Frozen water pipes, a broken-down bus, and a barbed wire fence all helped a Kirkland woman escape from Hungary with her husband, two children, and newborn son.

Some might think of the events 50 years ago as luck or coincidence but Helen Szablya calls them "little miracles."

"God gives you miracles and strength when you need it," she said. "I know my faith kept me going because in reality I was scared to death the whole time."

In October of 1956 Szablya was a 22-year-old student at a technical university in Budapest. She had two young children and was expecting her third. Her husband John Szablya, who died a year ago, was a professor there.

She was among the university students who initiated a peaceful demonstration in Hungary that turned into a revolt against the Soviet Union which was occupying the country.

Szablya, now the honorary consul of Hungary based in Kirkland, remembers and describes the confrontation as if it happened yesterday.

History's witness

"There was no family that didn't have someone executed, in jail, or sent to Siberia because of their religious or political beliefs," she said. "We wanted freedom."

There was hope of freedom in 1955 after the Austrian State Treaty was signed. The agreement established Hungary as

“independent” and stated the Soviets must leave. They did not.

On October 23, 1956 a large demonstration began in Budapest. Thousands joined the march from Parliament to the Radio Building where they wanted to have “16 points” broadcast on the radio.

“Those points were the rights we were asking for. Our bill of rights,” Szablya said. “We were a tiny country going against the huge Soviet giant. We were the first nail in the Communists’ coffin.”

The first shots of the revolution came from the Radio Building. Soviets fired on the crowd. Demonstrators, with weapons from Hungarian soldiers, fought back for several days. Eventually Russian troops withdrew from Budapest. The revolt seemed successful.

“Hungarians published 28 newspapers in the next four days and organized parties for free elections,” said Szablya. “We had our freedom.”

The unmistakable sound of cannon fire woke Szablya November 4, 1956. Freedom was over. Soviet tanks rolled through Budapest and fired at anybody appearing on the streets or looking out windows.

Ten days after the second Soviet invasion Szablya and her husband made it to a hospital – its windows blown out by machine-gun fire – and delivered their baby boy. Louis was baptized November 26, the same day they decided to escape Hungary.

“We were determined to leave our homeland,” she said. “Any person who was religious, and certainly we as Catholics, were looked at as ‘insects.’ We had to get to Austria.”

Trail of miracles

Szablya and her husband left Budapest carrying only their three children and six diapers. They paid a truck driver to take them to the border on an icy, rainy day. About 30 miles from the border a police officer stopped them and told them to “turn around and

go home.”

Undaunted, the truck driver tried another route to Austria. They were met next by a Soviet tank and were later taken to a police station. The sentence for trying to escape was usually three years in jail.

When the Szablya family arrived at the jail all the pipes in the building were frozen. Instead of detaining people, the Soviets ordered them onto a bus and sent them back to Budapest. Miles from the city, the bus broke down.

“The guard on the bus told us, ‘Of course you will stay here until I come back with help and that will probably be about an hour or so,’” Szablya recalled. “We waited a few minutes and then got off and ran to a nearby train station.”

The train seemed like a ticket to freedom for them, but it stopped before it reached the border. Everyone was forced off the train and into a nearby Red Cross building. Inside, the building was occupied by Soviets, who again put Szablya and others back on a bus to Budapest.

“We didn’t think we were ever going to get out, but still we had our faith,” she said as she clasped her hands together.

Back in Budapest, they regrouped and prepared for their next escape attempt. They forged transfer orders to make it look like John Szablya had been reassigned to teach at a forestry university close to the border with Austria.

On St. Nicholas’ feast day, December 6, they set out again by train to the university. The train car they happened to get didn’t have any interior lights. Soviet soldiers refused to board the car to check identification papers because they didn’t think it was safe.

“You can call that chance or providence,” she said. “A Hungarian soldier came on the train and looked at our letter. We had put all kinds of official stamps and symbols on it. He let us continue.”

When they got off the train, a man with a donkey cart took the Szablya family to a safe house for the night.

On the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, December 8, the family started an eight-mile trek to the border. Under a dark sky of stars but no moon, they trudged through mud and ravines with the help of one guide.

At one point Helen started to slip down a hillside. John couldn't reach over to grab her because he had their two-year-old boy Janos in a knapsack on his back. The child would have fallen out. Suddenly her coat got caught on a barbed wire fence which stopped her from falling.

One last “coincidence”

With only three-quarters of a mile to go, two men appeared from nowhere. They grabbed the baby's basket and carried it. The strangers helped the couple's four-year-old girl, also named Helen, run to the border.

“They must have been angels,” said a teary Szablya. “After we crossed the border they gave the basket back and said, ‘We never saw you.’ We had finally made it.”

Deep down Szablya said she knew her family would make it because they had faith in God. That faith sustains her today.

Szablya – who prayed to the Holy Family on their final, successful escape attempt – is a member of Holy Family Parish in Kirkland.

Commemorating the 1956 Hungarian Revolution

Saturday, October 21, a special noon Mass at St. James Cathedral will celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution. After Mass all are invited to a reception at the adjacent Cathedral Place.

Sunday, October 22, at 7 p.m. acclaimed Hungarian pianist

Endre Hegedüs performs at Benaroya Hall.



Monday, October 23, Helen Szablya will be among the speakers at a University of Washington academic conference about the Revolution of 1956. The event is from 7-9 p.m. in the Walker Ames Room in Kane Hall.

Szablya is co-author of the book “The Fall of the Red Star.” She enjoys speaking to students about history and teachers may contact her through her [website](#).