

THE DAY OF RECEPTION

This year, Hungary celebrates the 30th anniversary of the change of the Socialist regime. The Hungarian National Museum will be organizing events throughout the whole year to showcase the most important personalities and material world of the era under the title „Our Times - 1989”.

Over the past six months, many events have taken place in the museum to commemorate the change of the political system: roundtable discussions, pop-up exhibitions, calls for collecting objects from the given era and online social media actions. However, a big-scale exhibition presenting one of the most important, life-changing events of the end of the Socialist regime: the reception of the GDR refugees and the related opening of the border, the demolition of the Iron Curtain is yet to be opened this August.

This exhibition is the result of a joint work of the Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta and the Hungarian National Museum. The event also marks the birthday of the Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta, since this charitable organization was officially formed on February 4th in 1989. At that time even the founders could not foresee that the Charity Service would undertake the historic task of providing and caring for East German refugees within its first year of existence and with this charitable act it would become an important contributor to the demolition of the Iron Curtain and to the process of German reunification.

Here is the motto of Father Imre Kozma, head of the Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta, from his speech he delivered on the 25th anniversary of the organization:

“... We gave the only possible answer to what was happening at the time, and that answer was acceptance. Then we learned something, the most important truth: one human is the brother of another human, and prejudices and counter interests cannot separate people from one another.”

THE HUNGARIAN CHARITY SERVICE OF THE ORDER OF MALTA IS CELEBRATING ITS 30TH YEAR

For the „volunteers of love”, work didn’t stop after November of 1989.

In the early nineties, after the Romanian Revolution and the Yugoslav Wars, the public perception of the charity service, based on its real manifestations of social solidarity, was full of trust. Government agencies also entrusted the organization with solving social problems that had not or only partially been handled at societal level by the administrative, social and health care organizations of the time.

Thirty years after the establishment of the organization, this work is still on-going; expanding, growing and deepening year by year. Today, more than two thousand full-time staff members, six thousand volunteers, and two hundred and fifty social institutions serve those in need in the country and in the Carpathian Basin; as well as in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. Today, „Malta” has become one of the largest and most active charitable non-governmental organizations of Hungary.

BALATON – BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

With the construction of the Berlin Wall that split the city (1961), the complete isolation of the East German population from the West Germans was only solved for a short time. The split families did not reconcile with their situations and sought for every possible ways to meet and move to the Western part of the country. This is how Hungary became a meeting place for the inhabitants of the divided Germany.

After the Berlin Wall was built, German-German relations moved beyond the borders of the two Germany. Just at the same time when in Hungary the standard of living began to raise, which was significantly higher compared to other socialist countries. As a result, in the early 1960s, better quality services were available in Hungary that met Western tourists' tastes and expectations, and those from the socialist countries were also impressed. Western magazines, fashion magazines, clothing, cosmetics, record labels arriving to Hungary through private channels often gave the first impressions of the standard of living in the Western world, against which any political propaganda was ineffective. By the 1980s, Western press products were already officially available in Budapest or around Lake Balaton.

East German holidaymakers were able to travel to Hungary without a visa under the Visa Waiver Agreement of 1969, but required a so-called „visa-free travel voucher“, which usually allowed them to stay for 20 days. The same convention also stipulated that neither party shall permit the citizens of the other country to enter a third-country without valid travel documents. Due to the attractive „Western“ lifestyle and the opportunity to meet relatives living in the Federal Republic of Germany, more and more tourists came to Hungary from the end of 1960s, especially to Lake Balaton.

In the summer of 1989, an increasing number of GDR citizens visited the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany in Budapest to ask for help with their resettlement to the Federal Republic as many of their compatriots had succeeded in earlier years through the East Berlin German embassy and other embassies. Between 1988 and 1989, GDR citizens invaded the Embassy of the Federal Republic in Prague and in Warsaw, the Permanent Representation of East Berlin, and even the Danish and American embassies, where they practically enforced their permissions to leave.

One of the first information of the East German state security came from Budapest dated on July 10, 1989, which reported that by July 6, 40 GDR citizens had already been present in the West German mission, who wanted to rent a house to accommodate them. An undated summary made in East Berlin, quoted that on August 3, 158 GDR citizens were staying at the West German Embassy in Budapest. In the summer of 1989, the situation of East German tourists on holiday in Hungary became increasingly urgent. The end of summer vacations was approaching, and the question was how many of the GDR families vacationing here would become refugees overnight if they did not return home at the end of their holiday.



THOUSANDS IN THE CAMP OF HUNGARIAN CHARITY SERVICE OF THE ORDER OF MALTA

The Hungarian Malteses are mostly known in Hungary for fundraising, helping the homeless or even distributing food. However, the history and range of activities of the organization goes much further. Under its official name, the Hungarian Charity Service Association of the Order of Malta was founded on February 4, 1989, under the direction of Father Imre Kozma and with the help of 31 founding members. It was registered by the Metropolitan Court on February 10, under the entry number 10, making it one of the first registered non-governmental organizations in Hungary. The form of the association made it easier to distribute aid shipments, which were frequently arriving from Germany. Hungarian-born Csilla von Boeselager, living in Germany, was the engine of the initiative. The centre of early humanitarian actions was the Zugliget Holy Family Parish in Budapest led by Father Imre.

In 1989, the number of GDR citizens in Hungary who attempted to reach the West through the Green Border after the Austrian-Hungarian border had been physically demolished, reached a peak of several thousands. West Germany typically appeared as the land of hope and freedom for them. In August, due to the high number of East Germans who did not want to return home, a refugee disaster was to happen in Budapest. Father Imre's parish community was one of the helpers.

On August 13, 1989, Csilla von Boeselager and representatives of West German diplomacy discussed the solution at the Budapest Consulate. At the same time, the Consul asked Father Imre to help with the accommodation and care of the East German refugees. The next day German trucks arrived with tents and other camp equipment, and the first refugee camp opened in the churchyard. Shortly afterwards, new camps were opened in two campsites: on Hárshegy and in the pioneer camp on Csillebérc. The newly created Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta was thus in the midst of historic events: it took care of 48,600 people for three months, which was the largest humanitarian aid operation in Europe at that time.

Members of the parish circle and volunteers distributed food and clothes. Father Imre Kozma remembered the collaboration: "I called restaurants, workers' accommodations, hotels and told them about the situation. From then on, they brought food in masses, but no one asked when and how we would pay..." Stability of the supply was also maintained by the kitchen of the nearby St. John's Hospital, which provided daily hot meals. Container camp lavatories also arrived with German shipments.

Refugees did not only receive food and drink but also encouragement and support in the camp. However, out fear of the East German state security, many of the refugees had misgivings about each other. Not without any reason though: the Stasi was sitting in an apartment opposite the main entrance of the camp, watching it with binoculars, recording activities with a camera. Even within the camp, there were people who "reported". Refugees were constantly arriving. News about the camp was spreading by word of mouth and West German television newscasts also reported about the events in the closed courtyard of the typical church building. The West German embassy also directed there those who were affected. In fact, after the refugees had not dared to leave the camp site, a consular office was soon established in the garage of the church. Here, those with German ancestry were allowed a (West German) passport



by law. Many wanted to enter the FRG legally and start a new life. Others, following the instructions of secretly copied sketches, set out for the Austrian border at night. However, more and more families arrived to the camp.

On September 11, 1989, Hungary opened its borders to the citizens of the GDR. Camp dwellers were closely watching the broadcast of the decision. On the first day, 1,200 East German refugees left the garden of the Zugliger church. They travelled to Passau by buses coming from Vienna. Thereafter, everyday at 12 o'clock, the „Vienna Buses” arrived, delivering guests continuously to Germany. The last refugees left the Budapest camps on November 14, 1989. For the „volunteers of love” the work continued.



BORDER CASE

BEYOND THE GREEN BORDER

East German nationals crossing the border were initially detained for 30 days on the basis of the Legal Aid Convention in force since 1957 and the Framework Agreements on State Security Cooperation. Subsequently, the Hungarian Home Office transferred them to the representatives of the GDR State Security, Stasi, in Hungary. The detainees were expected to face a minimum of one and a half to two years in criminal proceedings and imprisonment in the GDR, and their families were subjected to a variety of retaliatory actions. In the first half of 1989, despite increasing level of the controls at the so-called Hungarian-Austrian „green” border, more and more East Germans were able to cross Austria.

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

In addition to the news on the dismantling of the Iron Curtain, there was another change that was far more significant from the point of international law. Hungary joined the UN Geneva Convention on Refugees of 1951, on March 17, 1989, which entered into force on June 12. This political decision was forced by the situation of Hungarian refugees in Romania. The international convention has superseded bilateral treaties on extradition of refugees or border violators. The entry into force of the Convention solved the case of Hungarian refugees in Romania, but it created another crisis: the issue of extradition of the border violating East Germans. It became a complex political and international law issue. The Hungarian government was uncertain whether to treat East German citizens as refugees, since they did not take into account the consequences of joining the Geneva Convention.

Meanwhile, the Federal Republic of Germany was trying to include these East German citizens among those protected by the UN Convention on Refugees. According to the Hungarian point of view, although the denial of freedom of travel by the GDR is against the law, it cannot be qualified as political persecution. In addition, East Germans regarded Hungary as a transit country, which made it impossible for them to get the refugee status. In the summer of 1989, negotiations were ongoing. The foreign ministries of the three countries concerned: the GDR, Hungary and the Federal Republic of Germany, the East German and Hungarian Ministries of Justice, and the state security offices tried to agree on possible ways to resolve the new situation. The Hungarian Home Office tried to avoid and delay the decision during the state security meetings: it was in their interest to postpone the conclusion of the new cooperation agreement until the end of 1989 or the beginning of 1990.

On August 25, secret discussions were held at the Gymnich Palace near Bonn between German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and Hungarian Prime Minister Miklós Németh plus the ministers for foreign affairs of the two countries. There was no official minutes made of the discussions concerning the refugee issue. This was later recorded by Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher for Chancellor Kohl. Between the Gymnich meeting and the planned expulsion of East Germans, the Hungarian government tried to appease the troubled East German leadership by negotiations. For this purpose, Foreign Minister for Foreign Affairs Gyula Horn travelled to East Berlin for a few-hour visit on August 31. He made it clear that, given the international public opinion and Hungary's international obligations, it will not return any East German citizens to the GDR by force.

SECRET SECURITY IN EAST GERMAN STYLE - THE STASI HUNGARY

The special role Hungary played in the relationship of the two Germany also meant the involvement of the East German secret service, the MfS (Ministerium für Staatssicherheit), or Stasi. East German tourists arriving in Hungary in increasing numbers were constantly monitored by the GDR leadership. All of this was accomplished in Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria with the support of the local associated bodies, the so-called operational groups. The Stasi Operational Group had been in Hungary since 1964, based on cooperation agreements between the two state security organizations. Its main task was to check the GDR citizens staying here, to detect planned crimes, typically to uncover the preparation of forbidden border crossings. Particular emphasis was placed on the surveillance of persons undergoing state security checks in the GDR and spending their holiday in Hungary. The informal staff employed by the operative groups were „seasonal” informants and officers from Stasi’s professional staff being on vacation at Lake Balaton. A special group of informal staff was made up of GDR nationals who were permanently staying or living in Hungary, for example studying, working on a mission or resettling here via marriage. Initially, their task was to monitor East Germans being on holiday, but later they were commissioned to produce reports that informed East German security authorities about changes in Hungary and the general feeling. For example, the East German state security learned about the first change in the practice of extradition of persons arrested under the border control system and under of suspected or attempted border crossings in the usual way: from East Germans arrested in Hungary in spring 1989, then transferred to Stasi as usual and then interrogated by them. Already at that time information from the so-called from ‚informal sources’, i.e. whistleblowers, arrived earlier to East Berlin, then from official Hungarian sources through any ministry concerned in the case.

BORDERS OPENING

DISMANTLING THE IRON CURTAIN

In 1970, the so-called SZ-100 electrical signaling system (EJR) replaced the mine system that had proved to be dangerous even for border guards. The guards closed the section from both sides and there was little chance for those trying to flee, as the Iron Curtain in Hungary was hundreds of meters inside the real state border. Thus, even if refugees had managed to get through the barbed wire fence and the signaling system, the border guards could still catch them in Hungarian territory. The line of the Hungarian-Austrian border was so meandering that successful escaped refugees often (thinking they were already walking in Austrian territory) eventually accidentally could reach Hungary again, where they were spotted and captured by the border guards.

From 1988, the world passport became available to Hungarian citizens, and as a result, strict control of the western border became redundant. On the other hand, maintaining the border lock would have been a major expense for the public finances, and the amount planned for it was cancelled by Prime Minister Miklós Németh from the budget. As a result, preparations for the dismantling of the Iron Curtain began in 1988 and actual work began in early 1989. This was practically made known to the world at an international press conference held on May 2, 1989, before it could have been announced through official channels to the GDR or the Stasi.

PAN-EUROPEAN PICNIC

On August 19, 1989, local organizations of the Hungarian Democratic Forum in Debrecen and Sopron organized a picnic between Sopronköhida and Szentmargitbánya. The event focused on the idea of a Europe without borders in the close future with Austria and Hungary agreeing to symbolically open a border crossing for three hours. The patron of the event was Imre Pozsgay, Minister of State, and Otto Habsburg, and participants from both sides of the border were welcome. It is still unknown who produced and distributed the German-language hand-drawn flyers that could be seen on the windshields of cars with GDR license plates in the days before the picnic. During the picnic, hundreds of East Germans literally stormed the border guards in service and fled to Austria. The number of GDR citizens fleeing this way is still controversial, estimated between 400 and 600 people. After the border crossing during the picnic, tensions continued to increase: representatives of the foreign ministers of the three countries were discussing possible solutions on a daily basis.

BORDERS OPENING

Events accelerated when Gerd Vehres, East German Ambassador to Budapest, sent a report to the GDR Foreign Ministry at 7:30 pm on 8 September. On that day, the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs handed over a note informing the ambassador of the decision to open the border, which was to be announced at 7 pm on 10 September. The diplomatic note stated that on September 11, at 0 o'clock, the Hungarian government would periodically denounce Articles 6 and 8 of the 1969 Convention on Visa-Free Travel, which stipulated that Hungary should not permit any East German citizens to leave to a third country. From then on, the Hungarian



State would, by getting rid of two clauses of the treaty, authorize the entry of GDR nationals with East German travel documents into a third country which would accept or allow them to transit through its territory. The decision was announced by the Hungarian Foreign Minister in news program entitled The Week on Sunday evening.

According to information from the border guard, by September 16, 1989, a total of 14,000 GDR citizens had left Hungary. Meanwhile, the news of border opening was spreading quickly in the GDR, and East Germans were constantly arriving to Hungary, many of them crossing the Czechoslovak-Hungarian border illegally. It was becoming increasingly common for those returning from their Bulgarian holidays to break away from their tourist groups and go directly to the Federal Republic of Germany via Austria and Hungary. In the early days, after the surge of refugees who were transported to the border by buses or trains, more and more people set out for their cars. By the end of November, 60,000-70,000 East Germans left for West Germany through Hungary.