

Immigrant recalls horrors of 1956 Budapest escape

By KATIE KERWIN

Judith Savic remembers vividly how she woke up one morning 22 years ago to a scene which changed her life drastically.

"I was nine years old and we lived in Budapest," she said. "One morning we woke up while it was still half light. I thought I was dreaming—I saw Russian tanks moving in. Unfortunately, it was true."

For the young Hungarian, the Budapest rebellion in 1956 meant fear and danger. She did not know at first that it was to uproot her from her homeland and eventually transplant her to Troy.

"We lived in the central part of the city," she said, close to most of the "action," which meant shelling and shooting. She remembers hiding in the cellar with her family, with "walls shaking and the plaster crumbling down on us. Our apartment was burnt out completely."

Ms. Savic recalls leaving her burning home through a basement window and crossing to the building behind it through rifle fire.

The children were allowed to go out for walks during the day, but she said that they often found the burned and mangled bodies of those killed by tanks and Molotov cocktails.

"When I first came here, I was so terrified of death that I couldn't see a war movie or go to a funeral," she said. "Time has lessened, but can never totally erase the indelible images the month of siege made upon the young girl, she said."

Ms. Savic remembers that before the building in which she lived was destroyed, her mother had taken turns with other residents, guarding the door against Hungarian rebels.

Rebels would sneak into buildings and shoot at Russians from the windows, she explained. This directed retaliatory mortar fire from the soldiers at the apartment building, endangering residents.

HER PARENTS made the decision to leave in December. Ms. Savic's mother had a sister in Detroit who had been urging the family to join her in the United States. Even with their home in ruins and most of their friends fleeing the country, "it was still a hard decision to leave home," Ms. Savic said.

Her family had remained neutral politically, she said. "That was the only way to exist there." It was mainly the danger and loss wrought by the 1956 rebellion that spurred her family to escape Hungary, she said. "If there had been no revolution, we would probably never have left."

Six refugees hired a truck and rode to a town on the Austrian border. Ms. Savic, her mother, stepfather and three others made the trip huddled in the back of the truck under boxes of canned goods.

"We went through six roadblocks on the way. At every one you'd tremble," she said. "Russian soldiers could jump on the truck at stops to search it. You couldn't even breathe—anything could give you away," she continued.

The family spent three days in a border town, waiting for a guide to lead them across to Austria. "We had to blend in to look like village people," wearing babushkas and carrying baskets, she said, because the Russians were watching towns along the frontier.

Escape was expensive. "It cost us everything we had left." Refugees bought help to escape with watches and jewelry, since the value of currency was uncertain during the rebellion, Ms. Savic said.

Escape was even more costly for others, though. "I didn't realize at the time what danger was involved in it," she said. "We found out afterwards how many had died trying to get out."

THE FAMILY set off on a December evening to cross the frontier, led by a guide. "I was riding on Father's shoulders," Ms. Savic recalls. "Sometimes, though, we had to crawl through thick grass on our hands and knees."

Crossing the no-man's-land, a mile-wide strip between the two borders, was the most hazardous part of the journey, Ms. Savic said. "Some areas were mined with land mines."

The little group finally crossed the frontier into Austria. "It's a different feeling for everyone—to be free."

"When we reached the Austrian flag, I swore I smelled oranges," she said with a smile. "That was my symbol of freedom." Oranges were a rare treat in Hungary before 1956, she explained. One orange received at Christmas time was split among the whole family.

Immigration red tape kept the refugees in Austria until April. "For those four months, we lived in camps that had been set up in schools and gov-

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—Judith Savic

ernment offices. We slept on straw bags and got rations."

Although life was far from easy at that point, she recalls that the refugees had "a beautiful Christmas." Besides the joy and relief at escaping safely, the Hungarians were treated warmly by the Austrians along the border, Ms. Savic said.

The inhabitants of the small towns took up collection and gave the refugees small gifts. "It really made us feel good," she said.

Sponsored by her aunt in Detroit, Ms. Savic and her parents came to Detroit in the spring of 1967, speaking no English and with one suitcase to their name. "We had to start from scratch," she said ruefully.

Still, they were better off than many other refugees, she said, because they had relatives in the U.S. to help them. Her stepfather, an engineer, got a job with General Motors, where he has worked for 20 years.

CHILDREN ADAPT quickly to changes in surroundings and culture, Ms. Savic said, and in many ways the transition was easier for her than for the adults. But plunging into American school, without knowing any English, was a traumatic experience for her.

"I was put right into the fifth grade," she said, commenting that children at that age tend to be less tolerant of differences in their peers.

"I was always different because of my experiences. After you go through something like that, you mature faster, I think."

She had always been interested in art she said, and the attraction intensified during that first year in America.

"During the period of adjustment, when I couldn't speak the language and couldn't talk to the other children, I could retreat into my work" in the familiar world of art, she recalled.

Ms. Savic went on to major in product design at Wayne State University. She is now a commercial artist, working in package design, graphics and illustration. She said her background has given her an added appreciation of the freedom to choose one's career and decide where and for how long one wants to attend school.

It was at Wayne that she met Bob Savic, a Serbian who came to the U.S. 10 years ago under a regular visa, to whom she is now married.

They were married in a Serbian Orthodox church in a traditional ceremony that included crowning of the bride and groom.

"The priest had just come from the old country, though," she recalls. "He couldn't speak a word of English yet." Ms. Savic went through the wedding, without understanding a single word, saying "Yes" and "I do" in the appropriate places.

"I knew what I was getting into, though, so I didn't care," she explained.

Hungarian and Serbian culture, food and customs are similar, although the languages are totally different. Mutual respect for each other's traditions is one of their marriage's strengths, she said.

"This whole range about roots," as she put it, "has some basis in our need to identify with our background and culture. It's still a part of us. It would be a shame to kill it."

Her family still speaks Hungarian when they get together and has a "soft spot" for gypsy music, and cooks traditional dishes sometimes, she continued.

The longing to renew old memories is what draws her to revisit her childhood home, Ms. Savic added. "I can stand it for five or six years. Then I have to go back." She said she tells herself on each return visit that it is her last, but always finds herself yearning to go back.

"I want to soak up a little bit of it to keep my identity," she said.

The 196 refugees have been granted amnesty to (Continued on page 6A)



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