

Andrew Telegdi

It was the voice of a soldier in the soft light of a winter dawn that let Andrew Telegdi know his night of terror was finally over. He was just nine years old when his family fled Hungary on foot, dodging landmines through snow-covered fields. Telegdi had walked for five hours, desperately hoping the cries of his baby sister would not alert Russian soldiers.



Then a soldier did call out to them. His accent was Austrian, however, and they knew they were free.

Fifty years later, Telegdi returned to his homeland to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution which began on October 23, 1956 and was crushed by the Soviets within days. This time, Telegdi would address the Hungarian Parliament.

“It speaks a lot about Canada that you can actually arrive as a refugee, and 50 years later you are coming back to your native country representing the Parliament of Canada,” Telegdi said.

Telegdi’s family arrived in Canada in June 1957, making their way to Toronto. He attended the University of Waterloo where he studied psychology and quickly indulged his passion for politics, serving as president of the Federation of Students in the early 1970s.

As a long-time Liberal MP for the Kitchener-Waterloo riding, Telegdi has become known for his outspoken support of civil liberties, immigration and multiculturalism. “Civil rights and civil liberties are like your health – you don’t miss it until you lose it,” he said once.

Telegdi, who served on Waterloo city council and Waterloo regional council before being elected to the House of Parliament in 1993, said living in fear under a Soviet dictatorship, influenced his political ideals. On the 50th anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution, in which 20,000 Hungarians were killed, Telegdi wrote about his own family’s escape:

“My older brother Paul and I were told that we could not tell anyone we were going to try to escape. Under the pretense that our mother was sick, my brother, sister, and I were sent to stay with invented relatives near the Austrian border. After spending a number of days at a farmhouse, we were joined by our parents just after midnight. My father had obtained a business excuse to travel with my mother to the frontier.”

Our journey to the border included hiding in a horse-drawn hay wagon and then walking for five hours through woods and fields covered with snow. I remember reaching the top of a hill and our guide pointed to a light in the distance, saying that was Austria. Then he left us to continue our journey.

That night was one of terror. We dodged land mines and patrols, and heard gunshots. In the early morning my father came across a graveyard. The names on the headstones were mostly German. We heard a soldier call out to us in German. My mother worried that he could be a Russian soldier who spoke German, but my father said if he was a Soviet he was speaking with an Austrian accent.

We were in Austria.”

Further on in the essay, Andrew Telegdi writes that he is not afraid to challenge the status quo or even his own leader in the pursuit of justice. “I was once afraid of Stalin, as he could make people disappear,” he wrote. “Thank God we live in Canada, where the prime minister cannot do that.”

Photo courtesy of Andrew Telegdi.