

Mária Filep:

## Borders of Freedom: from demolishing villages to demolishing walls

### The story of The Pan-European Picnic

May 1989 we were about to leave for Rumania with my friends. We were heading for Csíksomlyó, to participate the banned Withsun Pilgrimage. We had to wait almost half a day before we passed the border where all children's story-books and Bibles written in Hungarian were confiscated by Rumanian border authorities. All our way along we were passing Rumanian and Hungarian villages which had been artificially flooded and demolished. To hide our cars with Hungarian number plates from the secret police Securitate, our hosts sheeted the vehicles.

1989 all kind of outings in Hungary were about borders. At this time all over the country there were demonstrations organized against the altering the natural borders of our country, the destroying the historical landscape and the construction of the Danube barrage.

Spring 1989 border violators at the border to Rumania almost outnumbered 20000. First refugee camps in the country were established in Debrecen. In March Hungary joined the **1951 Refugee Convention**, the Hungarian government did not return refugees from Rumania any more.

May 2<sup>nd</sup> along the Austrian-Hungarian border, 500 kilometres from Debrecen the demolishing of the electric signalling system, the Iron Curtain, was launched. A few weeks later, to waylay refugees, Rumanian authorities started building a barbed-wire fence along the Eastern border some 30 kilometres from the city.

June 16<sup>th</sup> we attended in Budapest the funeral of the martyrs of the 1956 revolution. The commemoration with about a hundred thousand participants brought a cathartic moment. And another thing too: it signaled the power of democratic opposition and the indulgence of the potentates.

A few days later I was invited to the 'Sorsközösség' (Community Fate) camp organized by my friends in Budapest. The meeting lasted until August 20<sup>th</sup> and subject of the lectures was *Looking for Ways Out in the Middle of Europe – Is there a place for us in Europe?* Participants and lecturers came from Czechoslovakia, Rumania, Poland, Yugoslavia and the Baltic states, representing the political oppositions of their countries.

European Parliament Member Otto Habsburg visited Debrecen on June 20<sup>th</sup>, on the invitation of Debrecen MDF board member Lukács Szabó. His lecture at the Courtyard of Honour of Kossuth Lajos University was followed by great interest. Later that day in the evening he attended a dinner given by the MDF local board at the special room of the Hotel 'Aranybika'. During the conversation at the table Ferenc Mészáros raised his idea of a common bacon roast at the Austrian-Hungarian border.

June 30<sup>th</sup> I announced the invitation of the 'Sorsközösség' (Community Fate) camp. Mészáros presented his suggestion made at the dinner ten days earlier. This bacon roast

was about to take place at the former place of the Iron Curtain together with the former royal family.

The issue raised by Mészáros and the programme of the Community Fate camp got connected in my thoughts. By the following day I drew a plan for the picnic, in key words it gave: looking for ways out in Middle of Europe, at the Austrian–Hungarian border, demolishing the Iron Curtain; demolishing of the real and symbolic borders of freedom; meeting of the nations of Europe at the former place of the Iron Curtain.

To realize and perform this enormous task, looking for patrons seemed to be essential. Their persons were presented by the political situation: State Minister Imre Pozsgay, supporter of the democratic changes and Otto Habsburg Member to the European Parliament seemed to be the two most appropriate persons to support our plan.

In the beginning the executive committee of the local MDF took up the position the intention could not be implemented. Finally, they did not dismiss the conception of the event. However, the general committee of MDF drastically opposed it and declared us to be carpet-baggers who would be endangering democratic political changes.

Organizing the picnic was proceeding – most typically for those times – amid extraordinary circumstances. I was working as an engineer at one of the largest construction companies in the country. Among almost 3000 employees only two of us were members of the MDF (Hungarian Democratic Forum). We had no private telephone, fax-machine, office or typewriter. I had to organize everything from my workplace. No long distance calls were to be initiated from the office telephones. Where at the same time, brevity of time, made us keep daily contact with the patrons and participants. Budapest, Vienna, Munich, Pöcking, Győr, Sopron...With a fabulous trick we managed to pick up a line for long distance calls. Lukács Szabó kept in contact with Otto Habsburg and I found a way through intermediaries, to Minister of State Imre Pozsgay. The patrons answered surprisingly quickly and assured us of their support.

From that moment on I was in daily contact with the Bureau of the Minister of State through secretary Áron Sántha. Erzsébet Gelsey from Vienna forwarded messages to Otto Habsburg. I consulted the leader of the Community Fate camp; I suggested them to have the common demolishing of the Iron Curtain as their camp closing programme, at the Austrian–Hungarian border on August 19<sup>th</sup>. To realize this, we had to find a proper area along the border track. We chose Kőszeg as the first spot. As unfortunately we could not contact oppositional forces, I wrote a letter to Sopron. I found supporters in the persons of Dr. Félix Örs, János Rumpf, dr. Pál Csóka, László Magas and others. Oppositional organizations in Sopron adopted as co-organizers to find the proper border-land. At the same time my fellow colleagues from Debrecen were looking for financial supporters for the programme of the picnic.

July 20<sup>th</sup> Ferenc Mészáros formulated the declaration of the Pan–European Picnic, which we translated into eight languages. On my suggestion graphic-artist Ákos Varga made both the emblem and the poster of the event.

Middle of July tourists from the GDR (German Democratic Republic) were arriving in greater masses than ever before. Rumours and news were afloat they would not go back to their homeland and would be looking for asylum at the embassy of West Germany (Federal Republic of Germany). Summer 1989 Hungary became country of refugees. July 31<sup>st</sup> I travelled to Sopron to arrange personally with our partners the programme of the Pan-European Picnic, to find a proper spot where the Iron Curtain still existed and the state border was within reach from a field path as well. Hungarian Border Guard accompanied us with two cars as we were looking for a still existing part of the Iron Curtain, driving the Skoda of László Magas along the hills. A few days later our friends in Sopron found the best spot. August 4<sup>th</sup> we received from them a fax with a hand-drawn map of the border on it. As a result of their work through the opening of the former road to Bratislava, which connects Austrian and Hungarian settlements and which had been closed for 40 years, the planned symbolic demolition of the border became a fact.

August 7<sup>th</sup> I enclosed the map of the site of the event and sent a letter about the international meeting and opening of the border to Colonel Balázs Nováky at the Headquarters of the Hungarian Border Guard and expressed our thanks for their assistance and help.

It seemed reasonable to provide the event a wide publicity. The presence of both domestic and international press guaranteed our safety. We sent invitations and maps about the event to the embassies, informed the domestic press and Radio Free Europe or Radio Liberty. We expected Otto von Habsburg as patron to deliver news from the West. Debrecen MDF received applications to the picnic from all over the country. One day before the event in the news of the Hungarian State TV channel the leader of Community Fate Camp officially informed and spoke about the border which was to be opened for a few hours. At about the same time we learned the patrons would not participate the performance.

August 19<sup>th</sup> at four o'clock in the morning we left Debrecen with two busses, a van and several cars and were heading for the opposite-side borderline of the country to demolish the Iron Curtain and to open the border. According to our original programme the picnic was about to start at 3 p.m. with the opening of the border-gate and the demolishing of the border fence, together with the Austrian participants, who were about to arrive through the free border.

However life meant it differently with us. I had to leave the picnic site for a special press conference. The media meeting which gained a surprisingly great press publicity took longer than planned, therefore we were behind our schedule when we left for the border. Because of the GDR cars parking along both sides of the road we could only pass step by step. Together with state secretary László Vass who was representing State Minister Imre Pozsgay in his absence, we sat in the Lada car of one of the organizers from Debrecen and were heading for the border opening ceremony at 3 p.m. The gate at the site, we supposed to open, was wide. According to the border guards a group of people had broken through the border 10 minutes earlier. In that moment dr. Pál Csóka an organizer from Sopron arrived from the Austrian side of the border. With a smile in his face he told us, due to the many people and parking busses the road up to the next village was impassable. Meanwhile more and more people were arriving to both sides of the gate. Masses of people were

flocking from West to East and from East to West. The border guards were helplessly watching the whole situation. It was hopeless to ask anyone for documents. In that moment I understood what was happening: people who were heading West, crying and laughing were all speaking German.

I was walking up and down in the masses of people, between the open border-barriers on one side red-white-green and on the other side red-white-red. Almost 30 meter no-man's land, with a white border stone, 'gift of Trianon'. Signs on both sides of the stone were different like Ö (Österreich) for Austria and M (Magyarország) for Hungary 1922. For the sake of recording the historic moment and for the photograph we closed the double-wing gate then we opened it again. Till dawn several hundreds of East-German citizens left the country. At the camp site members of twelve different nations were demolishing everything that had been built earlier from barbed wire.

The greatest engineering task I have ever performed was the demolishing of the Iron Curtain at the border. Since then the border sign saying: 'Attention! State Border!' at the site of the breakthrough, at Sopronpuszta had disappeared.

Since then this has been the place, freedom and both, demolished borders and borders to be demolished, can and are always to be remembered.