



Speech by President **László Sólyom** at the Unveiling of the “Memorial to the Breakthrough, to Liberation”
on the 20th Anniversary of the Pan-European Picnic in Sopronpuszta

Ladies and Gentlemen!

Today we have gathered to unveil a memorial sculpture at the site where the Hungarian-Austrian Pan-European Picnic was held on August 19, 1989, where the border opened for several hours and where on the same afternoon over six hundred East German citizens went through the open fence and to enter the free world. Today, we mark the 20th anniversary of that day. We are commemorating the 20th anniversary of many historical events of that time. The change in Hungary's political regime was two decades ago. The Berlin Wall was opened 20 years ago. Hungary returned to Europe 20 years ago, and 20 years ago was when Europe started a new phase of unification that included the reunification of Germany and integration of the new democracies.

Has anyone noticed that there is no memorial to the regime change in Hungary? We only celebrate the European aspects of the changes? The government organized a major international commemoration of the anniversary of the symbolic cutting of the Iron Curtain in late June, and the rest is silence. True enough, the cutting of the actual barbed wire and the Pan-European Picnic organized by civil organizations were links in a chain of events European scale, events that confirmed the political and moral performance of the Hungarian government of the time, just as it confirmed the acts of the picnic participants. So, we have every right to be proud when remembering these events. In fact, we might even feel that daring actions are rewarded, that virtue wins its own reward, that there is justice in the course of history.

But, Ladies and Gentlemen, we who are gathered here today, the one-time organizers and planners of the picnic, the participants, and the former East Germans whose lives underwent a decisive change on that day – we know very well that no one foresaw this glorious continuation.

And although there is clearly no need – nor is it possible – to focus exclusively on the picnic and the East German breakthrough in the light of the international events that followed. It would not be necessary but would chop up history. This memorial nevertheless tells of a moment of history, the afternoon of August 19, 1989. This memorial sets apart the events and players of that particular day. It stands as an eternal memorial to their values, to their specific achievements, and to the emotions of the hour. It is a snapshot of the unquenchable desire of the picnic organizers for a return to a Europe without borders; it pays homage to their determination and quick-wittedness, to their ability to organize the picnic despite the obstacles of the time. Carved in stone, this memorial will be an eternal symbol of the bravery, born of desperation of the East Germans, who risked their lives getting through that border and of the incredible experience of freedom. This sculpture is a reminder to generations of Hungarians and Germans of a great event.

Ladies and Gentlemen, distinguished people of Sopron, honored guests from Germany and Austria, this was a day that would deserve a memorial, even if ensuing events had been radically different.

It was a day that carries a message far beyond itself. The mere fact that over six hundred people were able to break out from the section of Germany fenced off with a wall, with barbed wire, and with a command to fire on all who attempt to flee, and to reach the section of Germany that was free, deserves commemoration. Every single person, and the freedom of every single person, is priceless. Even if the continuation had been different, the responsible and brave decision of Hungarian Border Guard Commander on duty Árpád Bella, who prevented possible tragedy by opening the gateway, deserves the recognition of posterity.

Honored German guests, I am overcome by emotion when I turn to you, who have returned to this place after twenty years. We have all seen you in photographs and films – your faces have been carved into our memories as you rushed towards the open gate, followed by your combined tears

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and laughter as you reached the other side and were hardly able to believe that you were free. We know the story of the child separated from parents in the crossing and of the Austrian border guard who crossed into Hungary to retrieve the youngster. I know that it is not easy to meet with yourselves twenty years hence, and to face up to what you have become, to know the portion of your hopes that were realized. But, this is a place and a moment that it is worth calling to mind and reliving – for it was wonderful. I hope that you glean strength from this visit and meeting, for that is the rationale to all celebrations.

The organizers and executors of the Pan-European picnic, from Debrecen to Sopron, refused to allow it to be forgotten. They found others ready to remember with them, and commemorated it annually for the past twenty years, increasing the symbols of commemoration from a carved wooden memorial post to a fountain. And now they have performed a great deed with this sculpture.

The back of the sculpture contains the words: “An enslaved people opened their doors to allow another enslaved people to cross to freedom.” While this is true, we need to add that the people who made this freedom possible were themselves on the road to freedom. The Pan-European Picnic, just as opening the gate for the East Germans to cross to the west, were parts of the political changes that accelerated through the summer of 1989. Hungary’s own Roundtable Negotiations were nearing conclusion and free multiparty elections were in tangible proximity.

Ever since the change in regime, we have had to fight for the past. Who does the past belong to? Who made the regime change? What is the relationship between the new democratic system and the Kádár regime? How often have I had to stand up and point out that there is no continuity between the two! How often have I had to argue that there was only one 1956! This memorial sculpture also proclaims that it was the people, the people of our country who played the decisive role in the regime change. The Roundtable was not merely the negotiations of politicians, and what was accomplished was not some sort of reform Communist program. We need to remember the great actions, the tremendous and dignified silent demonstrations against the destruction of villages in Romania, as well as the ecstatic jubilation with which our people took possession of the streets on March 15, 1989. By that time, huge inspiring actions had been in progress for at least a year. Everywhere people were organizing, forming movements and parties. Local and national groups made plans for the future. They had begun to recall their Socialist Members of Parliament and to elect the representatives of the democratic forces which were forming to replace them. Local initiatives came fast and furiously. Everywhere outstanding sober-minded and daring people appeared. That year and a half to two years was a marvelous, and active time filled with hope. The Pan-European Picnic was produced by that spirit. It is a measure of justice that the actions of the people in carrying out the regime change twenty years ago has become a centre of international attention.

The memorial to the breakout commemorates that best feature of the regime change.

Sopron, civitas fidelissima, the faithful city, I want to thank you for remaining faithful to the best tradition of the regime change, and I want to thank the citizens of Sopron for remaining faithful. We must be happy that this first memorial to the regime change is significant in so many ways, that it speaks to many nations and that it is an honest memorial in every sense of the word.

