

THE HUNGARIAN REVOLUTION AND THE 56ERS



ON OCTOBER 23, 1956, a group of Hungarian students and workers in the capital city of Budapest began to protest against the Communist government. Within days, thousands more Hungarian citizens joined them, and by October 28, there was a call for a countrywide general strike.

The Communist government sent in tanks and troops to restore order. They far outnumbered the Hungarian people and on November 4, after days of valiant fighting, the Revolution was defeated. In the aftermath, hundreds of Hungarians were imprisoned or killed. Over 200,000 people fled to Austria and Yugoslavia, and from there travelled to other parts of the world in search of a new country.



A burned-out tank in Budapest during the Hungarian Revolution. Tibor Lukacs collection



From 1956 to 1957, refugees from the Hungarian Revolution began to arrive in Canada, most of whom settled in Ontario. Known as “the 56ers,” more than half of the nearly 40,000 Hungarians who made their way to Canadian shores came through Pier 21.

In 2006, Canada Post issued this envelope for the 50th anniversary of the arrival of nearly 40,000 Hungarian refugees to Canada. It bears the image of the Freedom Monument, which was erected for the 10th anniversary of the arrival of the “56ers” in Wells Hill Park on the shores of Lake Ontario. © Canada Post Corporation (2006). Reproduced with permission



Tibor Lukacs, second from left, and his family, ready to depart for Canada. Tibor Lukacs collection

Two months following the defeat of the Hungarian Revolution, 11-year-old Tibor Lukacs and his family escaped from their homeland. “By the light of a full moon, we fled on foot on the night of January 18, 1957,” explains Tibor. “To avoid capture by Communist soldiers, my parents, my two sisters, and I wrapped ourselves in white sheets, over our winter coats, so we would not be seen against the snowy backdrop of fields and highways. By early morning, we had crossed the Austrian border to safety and freedom. After living in a number of refugee camps for almost two years, my family and I eventually arrived in Canada by airplane in September 1958. For the following five-and-a-half months, we lived in Pier 21’s detention quarters, while staff and volunteers helped us settle in our new country. My father was sad that we would have to celebrate our first Canadian Christmas without a tree, so he cut down a small evergreen in a nearby park and smuggled it under his coat back to his room. My family then decorated the tree with pieces of tinfoil and coloured paper, which cheered us up. We later settled in Toronto.”