

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends!

When Hungarians assemble to commemorate the various events of our long history, there is often a sense of despair, of sadness and doom in what is said on these occasions. It is not difficult to explain this phenomenon simply because there has been much more tragedy than triumph that has been our destiny. Yet when we meet tonight, we should dwell on one major theme, namely, that we have managed to overcome adversity, we have survived.

Joe Vince.

We are here to commemorate and celebrate three events which fill our hearts with pride and which deserve to be remembered.

First of these is the eleven hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Hungarian state, the second is the eightieth anniversary of the establishment of the American Hungarian Federation of Churches and Societies here in the Mahoning Valley, and third, the fortieth anniversary of the glorious 1956 Revolution, [when a nation rose up heroically against the forces of tyranny].

Let us look at these events separately, and see their significance from a local, national and global perspective.

Eleven hundred years ago, our ancestors rode into the middle of Central Europe on their scrawny horses, accompanied by their families and their flocks. Sometime in the year 896, the tribal chieftain of the Magyars or Hungarians gathered at Pusztozser, and swore an allegiance to each other and to their leader Arpad to form a state in the recently conquered Carpathian Basin.

Thus a new country came into being in the heart of Europe: Hungary. Eleven hundred years later, the descendants of those proud warriors still rule the Hungarian Plains. This in itself is a remarkable achievement. Next time you are at a library pick up a good history book and look at the map of Europe in the year 900 or 1000. See how different that map is from the one we know today. While you will not find countries labeled: Spain, Portugal, Austria, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Yugoslavia, Russia, just to mention a few, you will find Hungary, exactly where it was founded in 896. — That, my dear friends, is something which is quite remarkable, and can be celebrated with pride.

While the Carpathian Basin has been the home of many ethnic groups in the 500 years before the arrival of the Magyars, the Hungarians will be the only ones to establish a lasting state. Being linguistically and ethnically different from the surrounding Slavic and Germanic peoples, it is even more amazing that they were able to maintain their identity, amidst often hostile neighbors.

A little over a century after their arrival in Central Europe, Hungary became a Christian kingdom. St. Stephen, the first ruler to wear the crown sent to him by the pope in 1000, moved his nation firmly into the family of western Christian peoples. This man of remarkable vision and energy, laid the foundation of a royal as well as ecclesiastical administrative system, which exists to this day, with minor modifications.

Under the successors of St. Stephen the medieval kingdom of Hungary grew and flourished. It was, and has remained for centuries the easternmost extension of Western Christendom, the furthest outpost of Western European Civilization.

of western civilization against onslaught ^{from the} East

It is not easy to be a bastion, or a protective shield, a role which Hungary was forced to assume throughout its history. In the 13th century the Mongols swept in from Asia and devastated the country, leaving hundreds of thousands dead before they finally retreated. ^{Life had to start} from the ashes of burned towns and villages. The country recovered, beautiful cities such as Buda, Pest flourished, universities were founded, the printing press was established in Hungary five years before it was first used in England. Note that in 1500 Hungary had roughly the same population as England. Compare the census figures today and you can appreciate the terrible tribulations which have befallen Hungary in the last 500 yrs.

Tragedy struck when the Turks overran the country in 1526. For the next 150 years Hungary was a battle ground between the Ottoman Empire and Christian Europe, with devastation everywhere. Liberation from Turkish rule did not bring the desired freedom. The country fell under the domination of the Austrian Hapsburgs, and although numerous insurrection and revolts tried to restore national sovereignty, these efforts were not successful. The most memorable event in this long struggle was the War for Independence in 1848, which also was crushed. A compromise was achieved in 1867 resulting in the formation of the A.-H. Monarchy. Union with Austria ended following World War I in which the kingdom of Hungary was drastically reduced in territory and population. Over one third of ethnic Hungarians were incorporated into the new states created by the victorious powers, and unfortunately still live as oppressed minorities. [to this day] Swept into World War II Hungary was occupied by the Red Army and was ruled by an un-elected Communist government until 1989.

Eleven hundred years of triumphs and tragedies, defeats and resurrections. Based on the resilience of this remarkable small nation, we can realistically hope that Hungary will easily endure and exist for at least another thousand years.

Hungary Today

Turning to matters with a more local connection, let us talk about Hungarians in America and more specifically in the Youngstown area. As you know a great wave of European immigrants reached the New World in the last decades of the 19th and the first decades of the 20th centuries. As part of this great influx of people, Hungarians arrived in the Mahoning Valley in fairly large numbers, attracted by the industrial base of this community. They worked hard, were law abiding and decent people yet found considerable hostility directed against them by the ^{more established} older, English speaking immigrant groups. [To be a Hungarian, "A Hunky" was not easy in those days.] It was not easy to be a Hungarian immigrant in those days.

It is to some degree in response to this hostility that the local Hungarian community decided to create an organization which would protect its members against discrimination and exploitation and to speak with one voice on matters of common interest. Thus on February 16, 1916 the American Hungarian Federation of Churches and Societies began its noble mission. It was emphatically stated in the foundation document that the organization was ecumenical and non-political, its only aim being the representation of Hungarian interests in every possible way.

The first function sponsored by the new organization was the celebration of March 15, Hungarian Independence Day, and this tradition has lasted to our own day. The Federation also became the major force behind the annual Hungarian Day picnicks; the commemoration of October 6, and Oct. 23 anniversaries.

Almost immediately the Federation began its efforts to help Hungarians, wherever it was needed, ~~here~~ locally as well as abroad. This too is a tradition which has lasted for 80 years! The first such project was to aid Hungarian prisoners of War taken by the Russians since 1914, who were living under terrible circumstances in camps all over Siberia. The Youngstown Hungarian community collected money and began a nation-wide campaign to free these unfortunate soldiers.

Closer at home, the Federation tried to protect the interest of Hungarian workers who had become ill or were disabled on their respective jobs. Negotiations were undertaken with the owners of factories, shops and mills, trying to gain decent and humane treatment for those who were often unable to speak English and therefore were called "stupid Hungries".

[To show their loyalty to their adoptive land, the Federation encouraged its member churches and societies to participate in the Fourth of July parade in downtown Youngstown. According to the papers, 350 Hungarians marched that day in 1916 under the various banners of their organizations.]

When the Great War was over in 1918, the efforts of the Federation in behalf of Hungary was renewed with even greater vigor. Substantial amounts of money was raised help a nation that was defeated and on the verge of financial collapse. Youngstown Hungarians were particularly generous in their aid to the malnourished and starving children of their homeland.

Following the dismemberment of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the re-drawing of borders in Central Europe, millions of Hungarians were pushed into oppressed minority status in the neighboring states. The A-H. Federation tried hard to

awaken American public opinion to the injustice that had befallen Hungary. The organization undertook a letter writing campaign to Senators, Congressmen, Governors and other public officials.

With the onset of the Great Depression and the virtual collapse of the local economy, the number of destitute families in Youngstown increased significantly. For ten years, from 1931 to 1941, the Federation provided Christmas baskets to needy Hungarians. [Yet even in those difficult times the local Hungarian community reached into its pockets to buy Hungarian language books for the Public Library, contributed to the "Hungarian Room" at the main building of the Univ. of Pittsburgh, the Cathedral of Learning. The Federation even sent money to help support Hungarian athletes who came to compete in the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics. Although finances were tight, the Federation provided two yearly scholarships to students of modest means.

The econ^y was improving slowly and this enabled the local organization ^{in 1937} to sponsor the appearance of the Univ. of Budapest Choir, who sang at Stambaugh Auditorium, before a packed house, of Americans and Hungarian Americans. It was obvious that the Hungarian community in Youngstown was proud of its ethnic heritage and was eager to show that we are member of a cultured nation.]

Following World War II, in which the territory of Hungary was the scene of great devastation and extensive loss of lives, the local Federation joined other Hungarian Americans throughout the nation in providing relief to the poor and encouragement to the oppressed. [Signatures were collected to protest the expulsion of Hungarian minority populations ~~and~~ from Czechoslovakia and the inhumane treatment of our brothers and sisters in Rumania and Yugoslavia.]

In 1947 the city of Youngstown welcomed a distinguished visitor, the recently appointed Archbishop of Esztergom, Cardinal Joseph Mindszenty. On that occasion, as well as a quarter century later when Cardinal Mindszenty visited our city shortly before his death, he was received in a spirit of ecumenical Christian love and affection.

Shortly after his return from America, Cardinal Mindszenty along with other Catholic and Protestant clergy, including Lejos Ordass, were arrested, imprisoned, tortured and convicted. The local Federation joined in the ^{world wide} condemnation of this travesty of legal procedure.

It is also fitting and proper to remember the dedication of the Am. Hung. Federation of Youngstown in welcoming two waves of immigrants to this valley, who came to find new homes, new opportunities and above all freedom. In the late 1940s and early 1950s came the so called D.P. or "Displaced Persons," [individuals and families who fled from the horrors perpetrated by the Red Army and their Communist henchmen]. After difficult years in various refugee camps in Europe, they were allowed to enter the US. This community opened its doors and hearts to these refugees, helped to find jobs for many and tried to make their transition to American life easier.

Hardly were the "Displaced Persons" settled, when the last great influx of Hungarians arrived in Youngstown, those who left their homeland following the 1956 Revolution. I remember well the reception of these refugees at Calvin Center and the efforts of the Federation to make them feel welcome.

As we can see, the American Hungarian Federation of Churches and Societies has a proud and successful history in this community.

There are some who think that the only function of this organization is to commemorate each year the anniversary of some tragic or glorious event in Hungary's history. In the 80 yrs of its existence, the American Hungarian Federation has, and continues to be, the guardian of Hungarian interests, locally and world wide. It has done its job well, has fulfilled the dream of its founders, and with God's help will continue to work into the next century.

The events of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 are well known and need not be enumerated. For a few days in late October and early November of that year, the world stopped and saw with wonder the heroic efforts of a small nation to free itself from foreign domination, to establish a democratic society based on the rule of law. Subsequent Hungarian governments tried desperately to convince themselves and the world, that this was not a revolution at all, that it was some plot by reactionary elements to destroy the so called "Socialist State."

No informed person who followed the events in Hungary during the fall of 1956 can deny this was indeed a revolution. Revolution means the rejection of the existing order, and the creation of a new political, economic and social system. The workers, peasants, students and intellectuals made it absolutely clear that they wanted no part of Communist dictatorship that had been forced upon them by Russian bayonets. They were simply demanding the basic human right to determine their own destiny, unhindered by external forces.

It is, (I think) tragic that the Western World did not exploit the situation presented to it by the events in Hungary. There is no doubt that Nikita Khrushchev and the Kremlin leadership were caught off guard, and were seriously considering the possibility that they would have to give up their control over Hungary.

But they were saved by the Suez Crisis and the assurance the Eisenhower Administration gave to ~~its~~ Yugoslavia, which immediately notified Moscow, that the U.S. has no intention to intervene in behalf of the Freedom Fighters in Budapest.

Had Hungary been able to escape from Soviet domination in 1956, it is doubtful that the Iron Curtain could have been maintained by force until 1989. Freedom would have come to Central Europe a whole generation sooner. That was not to be!

The Hungarian revolution was drowned in blood after the savage attack of Russian forces on November 4th. Terror descended upon the country and the cries of the dying and the tortured filled the cold winter air.

We ask ourselves the logical question: Was all this sacrifice worth it? The answer is an overwhelming, yes. The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 altered the face of Communism in such a way that it was never the same again. Thousands of Italian, French, Austrian, Belgian Communist tore up their Party Membership Cards when they saw their fellow workers and students slaughtered in the cities of Hungary. [The true face of Communism was forever exposed.] The regimes in Eastern Europe had to realize, once and for all, that they could never possess and control the minds of their peoples.

Just as in 1956 the Hungarians exposed the hypocrisy but also the vulnerability of the Soviet system, they were instrumental in bringing down the Iron Curtain in 1989. When Hungary, defying orders from Moscow, allowed East Germans to escape through its territory to the West, the Berlin Wall, the whole Russian satellite system fell apart.

Hungarians were the first to shake the Iron Curtain, and then gave the final push which toppled it.

[We have every right to be proud of what our brothers and sisters
did 40 yrs ago and 7 years ago.]

Since the fall of Communism, Hungary has regained its independence and national sovereignty. For the first time in decades people are free to come and go, engage in whatever legal enterprise they choose. It is true that the nation faces a staggering national debt, high rates of inflation as well as rising unemployment. We have to face the fact that 40 yrs of mismanagement and economic absurdities can not be corrected in a few short years.

Many of us are disappointed by the outcome of the last election in our homeland, but this too will change. We must remind ourselves that in the life of a country that has an eleven hundred year history, a decade or two is nothing! ^{A new generation}

It is therefore proper that we celebrate with joyous hearts. Remember that we have outlasted Mongols, Turks, Hapsburgs, Germans, Russians, rose again from the depth of defeat, partition and occupation. We have been indestructible - We are survivors!

The very fact that we are here tonight is the best indicator of our desire to live, and gives assurance that we will continue to exist for centuries, both here in this valley, as well as on the territory of our ancient homeland.

May it be so!