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The Sopron Story: Looking back 60 years later

How 200 Hungarian forestry students found their way to UBC

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Sopron School of Forestry group picture on the steps of the Biology building. January, 1957

Chances are, you know someone who has immigrated to Canada from another part of the world. Whether this person is your grandmother, your father or your friend — you've likely heard an immigrant's tale of persistence and incredible risk, one in which they left everything behind in the hopes of finding a haven from conflict or a place for their descendants to thrive.

The UBC Sopron Story



Narration by Laszlo Retfalvi, UBC Sopron Alumnus

According to Statistics Canada, approximately 235,000 people have immigrated to Canada every year since the early 1990s. A 2011 census indicates that 20.6% of our total population was foreign-born. The immigrant's story is a common one in the collective history of Canadians and one that never ceases to humble and inspire. In a world where countries are at war and borders are enforced, these stories are important reminders of what can be accomplished through stewardship and compassion.

While the immigrant population has been steady in recent years, it has fluctuated considerably throughout history, tending to increase in times of global humanitarian difficulties. This was the case in the years 1956 and 1957, during and after the Hungarian revolution, when approximately 37,500 refugees arrived in Canada from Hungary. However, what is not widely known is that roughly 200 of these refugees

were forestry students from the town of Sopron, Hungary, who were forced to flee their school. Consequently, they immigrated to Canada to continue their studies at The University of British Columbia.

In November of 1956, the newly formed Hungarian government used force to stop the ongoing revolution by sending Soviet troops to invade multiple Hungarian cities. The students and faculty at the Sopron Forestry School fled across the Hungary border into Austria. Once there, the Dean of the Faculty of Forestry sent letters to twenty different countries to ask for refuge and an alternate educational situation for his students. Canada responded and proposed the students come to UBC to complete their degrees over the course of five years, first in Hungarian and later in English once they adapted to their new environment.

"This was not a planned departure. It happened quickly as the events of November 1956 unfolded," wrote Dr. Antal (Tony) Kozak, professor emeritus, in his article "Sopron Story". Tony Kozak was a beloved UBC Faculty of Forestry professor in resource management and a Sopron refugee. He passed away in June, 2017 at the age of 81.

"The Sopron Forestry School exodus was a unique emigration unparalleled in history," wrote Tony, "A significant portion of a university left a country, while another country adopted them, so that they could continue on with their education in their own language."



Dr. Antal (Tony) Kozak 1957

Tony Kozak's son, Robert Kozak, is a UBC professor in sustainable business management and is the current associate dean, academic of the Faculty of Forestry. Robert is familiar with his father's immigration story and has heard unique anecdotes about the Sopron immigrants' transition from Hungary to Canada.

"It was very difficult. They were refugees," Robert says. "They didn't speak a word of English. It was a brand new culture. The ecosystems that they were studying were incredibly different. They came with virtually nothing."

The Sopron students were young. At just eighteen or nineteen years of age, they moved across the world, leaving their families behind, not knowing when they might see them again. While their immigration was difficult and born from unfortunate circumstances, the students were resilient and successful in adapting to life in British Columbia. They initially lived at the Powell River Paper Company, where they acclimated to life in Canada and learned English from the loggers who worked there. To earn money, they found odd jobs. Some worked in construction, some on the railroads. They found whatever work they could to provide for themselves in those early years.



“We were awed by the giant ancient forests and surprised at the rate and means of forest harvesting, but we were quick to adapt,” says Sopron Immigrant, Laszlo Retfalvi in the film “Sopron” created by Clancy Dennehy. “Through out work in forestry we managed to influence practices towards sustainable use.”

“They were big soccer players, all of them,” Robert adds. “The Hungarian team at the time was challenging for the World Cup, so soccer was huge. They set up these pick-up leagues and started playing against the local First Nations, and found more often than not, they would get creamed.”

The Sopron students were able to maintain high spirits and meaningfully connect with local communities in the first few months of their arrival. Once the students graduated, many of them found employment in British Columbia’s forest sector.

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Dr. Robert A. Kozak Professor, Sustainable Business Management Associate Dean, Academic. Photo by Paul Joseph

Without the Sopron students, the forest sector of British Columbia would be very different today. The faculty at UBC would certainly be immensely different without their influence. The Sopron students brought a distinct perspective to their studies at UBC. They encouraged implementation of conservation ethics and sustainability in the work force. These theories were not largely practiced in British Columbia at the time.

The Sopron story is an excellent example of how international perspectives can lead to unique and innovative practices. The Sopron immigrants were able to find refuge at UBC, while also positively benefitting the Faculty of Forestry by creating an exceptional learning environment. It’s a story that is incredibly important to remember, especially at a time when the advantages of diversity are being challenged.

"I'm fearful that we're becoming awash in racism and xenophobia and fear of people from other places," says Robert. "We're seeing our values eroding over time, and I think going back and looking at stories like this helps us to remember that maybe it's not such a bad thing. [My father] said, coming to Canada was the best thing he ever did. Being a Canadian meant everything to him. To be afforded this opportunity to live in a way that they weren't oppressed was incredible — just an amazing opportunity. He felt very fortunate."

To learn more about the UBC Faculty of Forestry visit their [website](http://www.forestry.ubc.ca/) (<http://www.forestry.ubc.ca/>).

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