

# Laszlo Nagy

## The Pan-European Picnic, and the opening of the border on the 11" of September 1989

The history of the Pan-European Picnic is very didactic, from idea to realization. To have a true understanding of the interconnections, the weight of the events and their consequences, is possible only if we recall the age, the political constellation of the time, which for many is already fading away. It is also worth to mention briefly, how the operation of the "iron curtain" was brought to an end.

### Prevailing history

The so called "Sz-100" type, 246 km long alarm system - the "iron curtain" - was built between 1965 and 1971" following the decision made by the MSZMP PB (Political Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Labour Party) on the 11 th of May, 1965. It was going to replace the system of barbed wire and mine fields, which was set up right along the Austrian b.order in the year of 1949. Janos Szekely, the National Commander of the Frontier Guards has pointed out several problems in the operation of the system in his reports, addressed to the Ministry of Home Affairs". He has mentioned beside the growing number of technical problems, the grotesque fact that since the Soviet Union was no more producing the parts of the established security system, the problem of replacing the wire of stainless steel could be solved only by western import, which would demand a substantial amount of foreign exchange. Istvan Horvath, the Minister of Internal Affairs, declared in an interview that "... *at certain parts along the national border there are still some installations and accessories of old times,* " and he also suggested, that it was time to demolish the technical security system of the border". Imre Pozsgay, Secretary of State, a member of the MSZMP PB, gave sound to his views in Gyor on the 26th of October 1988 ". .. *the electronic alarm system has, morally, technologically and politically outlived itself. ...*

In 1988, on the 24th of November Miklos Nemeth takes over the post of the Prime Minister from Karoly Grósz. At the turn of 1988 to 1989 Istvan Horvath, the Minister of Internal Affairs, puts forward the proposition of demolishing the electronic alarm system to the MSZMP PBs. On the 28th of February 1989, the Political Committee accepts the proposal". On the 9th of March 1989, The National Headquarters of the Frontier Guards works out a "program" for the demolishing plans, which is tested on the 18th of April, by a series of experimental exercises within highly secret conditions<sup>7</sup>.

On the 2nd of May the date of the official start was announced at an international press conference, on the 2nd of May 1989 at Hegyeshalom, in the presence of two hundred international journalists". The electronic alarm system was switched off on this day for good.

On the 27th of June, 1989, Alois Mock and Horn Gyula, both ministers of Foreign Affairs, had actually cut through the "iron curtain" in order to demonstrate this action, at the time when the process of demolition was already well in advance". The deadline of the work was to be the 1st of January, 1991. In the meantime, on the 21st of June, the Rumanian authorities started to raise a barbed wire along the Rumanian-Hungarian border. At the same time the number of refugees shot by Roman frontier guards were increasing within the frontier zone!

Looking back from the distance of a decade, the surrounding political atmosphere of the time may seem rather idyllic, but it was not felt so in the every day life. The fact, that within the leading political circles there were some enlightened, or rather, rational minded people, who were trying to act accordingly to the European mode of politics, and get prepared for the expected changes, did not mean, that regarding the future, the very same politicians could have also supreme power over the political matters. The reason for it was probably that the so called "reform wing" was in minority in the MSZMP.

Looking simply at the international political state, it was due to Gorbachov, due to the activities of the political opposition as well as to the growing social pressure that these people were saved from the fate of Nagy Imre, Dubcek or Walesa.

Let us not forget either that still in 1989, although the verbal announcements were suggesting favorable changes, the established, institutionalized order of the former totalitarian regime was in force.

Among those; the so called department of III/III or the Worker Guards, furthermore the old laws were still in existence.

In fact the activities of the forming, yet illegally functioning opposition parties could have been also charged with illegal activities..

The organization of the Pan-European Picnic could have been also considered such an offense; it could have been labeled as "giving help to illegal crossing of the border"! Or let us remember what a scandal was caused by the declaration of Imre Pozsgay, according to which, the events of 1956 was considered a national uprising. Let us not forget also that for how many people did mean the threat of "change" fear for retort, how many feared the loss of his/her job, power, position, privileges. On the other hand, under the extremely tensed political situation, in spite of the extreme instability, and the constant political turbulence, it could be hoped for that this time there is a chance to bring a radical, and final political change into Eastern-Europe.

### **An idea is born**

During this obscure, tensed, imenetrable, pre-crystallizing time was born the idea of the Pan-European Picnic. It seldom happens that an idea is attached to one particular person. Yet such is the case with the Pan-European Picnic. The idea was born in the mind of Ferenc Meszaros, then a citizen of Debrecen - today a citizen of Sopron - on 20th of June 1989, during the dinner that followed a lecture of Otto von Habsburg, in Debrecen. At the table, his conversation with Karl von Habsburg came about the Berlin Wall. The fact, that in spite of all favourable views, the Wall still stands erect, undisturbed in Berlin, and so does the iron curtain along the "intergerman" border and along the western borders of Czechoslovakia .

Meszaros Ferenc had a thought that they ought to continue this conversation one day at the Austrian border of Hungary, setting a bonfire right on the borderline, roasting gammon over the fire within the occasion of a picnic. One party of the guests would sit on the Austrian side, while the rest on the Hungarian side, demonstrating this way the strikingly different conditions along the western borders of the East-European countries. They had a good laugh over this idea and moved on with the conversation to another topic.

But on the 30th of June 1989, during a meeting of the MDF (Hungarian Democratic Forum) Ferenc Meszaros brought up the idea once again, which nobody could take seriously, except for Maria Filep. Because Maria Filep thought that it was quite

unlikely to realize such a meeting for a few members of the opposition and for some members of the former ruling family, she thought of extending the circle and include the participants of the Common Fate Camp, which was run also by her. According to her plans the Pan-European Picnic was to be the closing program of the Camp. On the next meeting of the MDF, Maria Filep was ready to put forward a plan with the title " *Picnic on the place of the iron curtain*." The date was to be the 20th of August, the place; Fertorakos.

Imre Pozsgay and Otto von Habsburg were suggested to be the sponsors of the event. The participants were to be the Common Fate Camp, The MDF, the FIDESZ, the SZDSZ, the TDDSZ and the Hungarian Scout Society.

The idea was welcomed by Ferenc Meszaros alone. The others found that the idea was impossible to be carry out because of the tremendous expenses, because of the short time available, and above all because of the considerable distance from the border. In spite of all, the plan was accepted. Maria Filep and Ferenc Meszaros started the work involving also the organisation of the National Committee of Clubs.

### **The act of Organisation**

The first and hardest part of all proved to be to establish connections with the sponsors. When it was succeeded, Imre Pozsgay had immediately expressed his pleasure about the plan. On the 10th of July the agreement was made also with Otto von Habsburg. The following day, on the 11th of July, an official letter was dispatched to Erzsebet Gelsey, the personal secretary of the Habsburg family, to Vienna. In the meantime the date of the event was brought forward to the 19th of August in order not to coincide with the national holiday which was on the 20th of the month, the forthcoming event was given also the final name: Pan-European Picnic<sup>12</sup>.

As soon as the approval was given by the sponsors, the organizers tried to get in touch, as fast as they could, with one of the MDF-organization group that was based close to the border. They could find the addresses from the national organizers of the MDF; Bela Szabó and Lajos Torma. At first they sent a letter to Koszeg, to which no reply was received. Then Maria Filep sent another letter of request, on the 15th of July, to the MDF in Sopron, to the home address of Laszlo Magas. In the meantime she managed to find also the telephone number of Pal Csóka and Felix Ors, and so the connections were established with Sopron. The MDF in Sopron has called immediately a meeting. Most of the members felt rather sceptical about the idea, since it was already past mid-July, and also because many of the members were away on their summer vacations. They were worried that in the situation given, it was impossible to organize the Picnic well.

Since The Round Table of The Opposition in, Sopron was functioning very well at the time (MDF, SZDSZ, FIDESZ, FKGP), and it was an unwritten rule that every event was organized in co-operation, the idea came spontaneously that the MDF would start action together with the other three partner-organizations. The parties have immediately joined in, and the work has started. It was in Sopron. on the 31th of July 1989 that we met Maria Filep. During the following day, on the 1st of August, a meeting of a very detailed discussion took place at the home of Csóka Pal with the presence of Soproni Horvath Lajos journalist, who was also broadcasting the events. During the same day, with help from the Frontier Guards, a field trip was made, and the location was chosen for the forthcoming event.

Among the few possible choices there was the football field at Brennberg, the plain at Harka, and some other open spaces, mostly within the area of Nagycentk and Kophaza. Finally, the closeness of the "iron curtain", and the possible dismantling of the wire at Sopronpuszta helped to bring about the decision. Geza Banoczy and Geza Erdelyi had called the attention to this fact. Of course there were arguments and disagreements. The people from Debrecen were disappointed, because they believed wrongly that the "iron curtain" was placed right on the border line, but it was not so, at that point there was only a wire net, which was to keep the wild animals away. The system of SZ-100 was set up 500-2,000 meters inside the actual border". Finally everything was settled, and the different tasks were sorted out.

Laszlo Magas (MDF) and Zsolt Szentkiralyi (SzDSs) were appointed to be the chief organizers. The job of the MDF group was mainly to concentrate on obtaining the permissions and to organize the opening of the border, while the group of SZDSZ was working hard on getting ready all propaganda and other printed materials. The FIDESZ was participating with a small but very eager group of three only (Ferenc Ivanics Ferenc, Szabolcs Vigh, Ferenc Vecsera) because of the summer vacation of the university students. The work of the tiny group of freshly founded FKGP was coordinated by their very active leader Andor Komlos. A good slogan was needed for a start. It was not one but two that we found! The invitation "*Dismantle it and take it!*" was the idea of Janos Rumpf. The invitation "*Crash the wall instead of villages!*" was implying both to the pulling down of the Hungarian villages in Rumania, and also to the Berlin Wall. The idea came from Csoka PÁL. The placard of this image was realized by Gyorgy Kerekes decorator",

Because of the peculiar legal rights, it was not easy to obtain permission for cutting pieces from the wire net of the "iron curtain". We did not know who to ask for the permission. The system theoretically was no longer existing, but as the State Farm of Sopron was planning to create a wild game reserve at Sopronpuszta, for their special request, the wire net was left to them by the Frontier Guards. Peter Horváth, the director of the estate at the time, allowed generously to demolish a "few meters" from the wire fence, which was promised to be restored later on by the organizers. In this matter, as well as in all other matters, colonel Istvan Franko, the Commander of the Frontier Guards in charge at the surrounding area of Sopron, was extremely helpful, a person with whom the Round Table of Opposition had from earlier on a positive and correct relationship. This was quite unusual in the existing political situation, and hence the attitude of Franko Istvan called for displeasure from many persons in power.

The work in Debrecen was progressing parallel to the work in Sopron. The nationwide propaganda in the press was taken care of by Gábor Túri, Zsolt Porcsin and Tibor Krecz. The emblem of the Picnic was born: a white dove breaking through a barbed wire. It was a work offered by Akos Varga graphic artist, as well as the making the placards. The group in Debrecen was taking care of all the food supply; the bread, the bacon, the paprika, and all the refreshing drinks, as well as the ordering of the Picnic T- shirts. Those were done by Mrs L. Ferenczy, Imre Hernyák, László Engi and Lukács Szabo, with the help of different sponsors. They could locate two buses for bringing the organizers and the participants to Sopron. (One of the buses was lent by the director of the company where Maria Filep was working, free of charge, The other was lent for the occasion by Laszlo Engi, contractor.)

On the 4th of August, with the help of Sándor Balogh, we sent the final version of the

map to Debrecen by fax, giving direction to the location where the event of border opening was to take place.. On the same day Imre Pozsgay has announced that his secretary, Vass Laszlo, will represent him on the picnic. Very soon the news arrived that it was Walburga, the daughter of Otto von Habsburg, to represent the second sponsor of the event at the picnic, at Sopronpuszta.

In the meantime the site was getting prepared for the occasion, everything done according to the requirements of the Frontier Guards and of all other relevant authorities. On the 10th of August there was a supervision made by the organizers, the representatives of the town, and all authorities involved (Electricity, Water, Frontier Guards, Health, LFMK, Transport).

Tamas Stockert has arranged a meeting of reminder at the Town Hall. In this review the conditions were put down to be observed by the organizers. An idea occurred that in order to enable easier participation for the Austrian guests, a temporary border-crossing ought to be made. This idea was no part of the original plans. Laszlo Magas was suggesting to open the border across the road towards Margit tanya, the old national road which was leading to Pozsony (Bratislava), where the operation of the frontier station was closed down since 1948. A wooden gate was around at the place, with a chain and a lock on it, the key belonging to it had been long lost.

The temporary opening of the border had to be approved by the appropriate authorities both in Austria and in Hungary. On the Hungarian side it was done very quickly, thanks to Imre Pozsgay's help. He gave to Filep Maria the names and the telephone numbers of those with whom the organization had to get in touch in order to obtain the permit. Finally, the permission was given from the highest authorities of the Frontier Guard. There was a permission given for the Hungarian border to be opened on the 19th of August 1989, from 15.00-18.00, on the selected spot, along the old road to Pozsony.

We had no connections in Austria and therefore the organizers had no idea who to apply to for obtaining the permission. Pal Csóka was given the task to establish contacts somewhere in Burgenland, in order to get some direction. He spent the afternoons loitering around the neighboring towns and villages with the hope to find some organization or politician who would be willing to help.

Eight days before the already announced opening of the border, which was in reality still without permission, he met Andreas Waha, who was the mayor of St. Margarethen at the time. A policeman on duty was directing him to find Mr Waha, who was busy with the preparations for the opening ceremonies of the wine festival in Margitbanya. The mayor found the idea absurd and impossible to be realized within eight days. But seeing the material of information, the placards and the notifications in German language, he got enthusiastic about the idea. Taking advantage of the opportunity of the wine festival, where a considerable number of leading politicians of Burgenland were present, he invited Pal Csóka to join their table. The officers who happened to be there by chance, gave information about the necessary procedures, and promised, from their part, to be quick and efficient to respond.

According to their advice Gabor Lorincz composed two letters in German, in the name of the MDF organization of Sopron. One of the letters was posted on the 14th of August, addressed to the Board of Directors of Security of Burgenland, the other, to the section in charge within the Headquarters of Customs, on the 17th of August. This letter, because of the short time, was delivered by hand, by Gabor

Lorincz and Zoltan Horvath in person, together with the necessary Austrian official stamps for issuing the certificate of permission. In the background Mr. Waha was tirelessly busy on the telephone line, helping to make the arrangements, since without keeping to the official procedure it was impossible to issue the permission. Even so it was given only by word, by telephone to the Austrian frontier guards at the border. There was no way that the official, written permission for opening the border would get there before the date of 19th of August 1977.

According to the previous arrangements made between the Austrian and Hungarian authorities of the Frontier Guards, there was only to be a certain number of Hungarian and Austrian officials to cross the border, and no other person. While taking the official measures, Mr. Waha gave so much voice about the forthcoming events in Burgenland, that the whole area around the lake Fertő became alert. It was to be seen only on the day of the Picnic, where a kind of mass migration took place across the border (which was reopened after 41 years) coming from the Austrian side, making the crossing from the other direction, for the Hungarian delegation, impossible.

The mechanism of the local propaganda, in spite of the limitations and the small number of the organizers, was functioning perfectly. In Debrecen, Gabor Túri got hold of the list of addresses of 25 Hungarian Embassies abroad and dispatched to each, in English translation, the program of the day; including the maps, sketches, and notifications. The radio station, Free Europe, gave also a substantial advertisement of the event. With Tibor Krecz communicating, the daily newspaper Magyar Nemzet (Hungarian Nation) gave reports about the event of the Picnic. There was no end to the incoming, supporting letters. The mental participation in the demolishing of the iron curtain was expressed by the Rákóczi Society, the Sprint Runner Club of Komárom County, the Szechenyi Society, the Society of Christian Intellectuals, Várdy Huszar Agnes from Pittsburgh (USA), and many others.

Western Television companies were showing up in Sopron during the last two-three days, one after the other; the SATI, the ORF and others, all wishing to talk to Laszlo Magas. They asked to be taken to the site at the border in order to see what were the light conditions around three o'clock in the afternoon. It was not so surprising to see European TV companies around as it was to see one, coming from New Zealand. It was no less unexpected than not to see any of our National Television team, whose absence meant to be an intentional display of disinterest.

The handful of organizers spent every minute with hundreds of small- but demanding matters. They were especially careful to keep to the conditions given.

Everyone knew that for political reasons this event can no longer be stopped.

It was feared though, that finding some excuses for not fulfilling the requirement of any the authorities, it may still happen. Our friends were arriving sporadically, in groups from Debrecen; on the 17th, on the 28th, and in the morning of the 19th of August. and gave a helping hand to the remaining works. During the last day there were still the jobs of wood-cutting, brush-wood collecting-, setting up tents-, raising of platforms to be done, arranging the loud speakers, and finally setting up the signboards by Gabor Hamori. With these works the preparatory works were coming to its end. By this time there were a considerable number of East-German citizens in town, who arrived by no way of coincidence to Sopron, but of whose presence the organizers were unaware.

## The events of the “big day”

The official program has opened with an international press conference, at 14.00 p.m. on the 19th of August, on the terrace of Hotel Lővér. From the part of the organizers Maria Filep, László Magas, Ferenc Meszaros, Laszlo Nagy, Zsolt Szentkirilyi were present, as a guest; Dezsó Szigeti, a Member of Parliament. The informations were given in German, in English, and in Hungarian. A large number of international journalists were listening to what was said. The Hungarian press was represented by Ottó Abineri, the journalist from the newspaper of “Frontier Guard”, and Lajos Soproni Horvath, the reporter from the Magyar Hirlap.

Because Laszlo Vass, the representative of Pozsgay Imre, was late to arrive, and also because of the many questions which had to be translated into two different languages, the press conference took longer than it was planned, and the participants could not get to the site according to schedule at 15.00 p.m. The press conference must have been getting to the end by 14.47, when the “break-through” had taken place at the border.

The bus which was taking the journalists to the site, lead by the writer of this article driving ahead, arrived about 15.30-15.40 to the border. It was impossible to get closer than a hundred meters to it, because of the mass of Austrian guests, invited and not invited, coming through the border, rushing through the maize fields, making impossible for anyone to move about. According to the program the delegation which was arriving with the bus was to walk across the border and continue to the Main Square of Margitbanya, where the mayor, Andreas Waha and Pál Csoka was waiting to welcome them, with the local brass band on their side. Following this ceremony, the delegation was to return to the border, and than continue to go to Sopronpuszta, to the site of the Picnic, where the official program was to take place. It was next to impossible to carry out such a plan, because of the absolute chaos ruling at the border. It was impossible to have control over such a crowd. There was no way to have been prepared for the reception of anything like that, and in any case, nobody was counting on such a tremendous interest.

The confusion was increased with another unexpected event which turned everything upside down, and to which Arpád Bella lieutenantcolonel, the person most closely involved, the commander of the temporary border station, remembers as follows: *“When the Austrian colleges had arrived, we discussed with Johann Goltl our plan of order according to which the delegation would cross the border. We were talking and awaiting. A few minutes before 15.00 p. m., which would have been the scheduled arrival, a large group of people have appeared within sight on the road, at about a hundred meters distance, walking towards us. The group coming closer did not resemble a delegation, but rather a group of East-German citizens. As I approached them towards the gate, it became clear that they wished to go over to Austria. They have not given a chance for a second question, they pushed aside the wings of the gates and rushed through with the speed of a fast train, causing tremendous upheaval. I must say that the appearance of the East-German citizens were just as unexpected as they were not. Our big problem was whether the big group, forwarned by a telegraph, received on the 11th of the month, will appear on the event or not. If, in spite of the positive denial they arrive, with the five soldiers, who were appointed to do the passport control, we shall not be able to hold them up according to the given instructions. If this group attempts to cross the border and finds any obstacle; due to*

*the disappointment, and to the emotional tension it will easily turn into violence. Violence gives birth to violence, and that causes panic. And as it is well known, there is no control over panic. The armed and those without arms will clash, and it is always the one without weapon that will suffer the more. There is a good reason why the special literature suggests tolerance during the occasion of mass movements in order to keep peace, the school of understanding and dialogue has to prevail. Time has proved, that what we did, and what we did not do, here and now, at this present place is considered probably by all of us just. I must note, that it is not sure that what has happened, had to happen the way it did. Within normal circumstances it is not favourable that in a free, democratic state lieutenant colonels make the decisions, because in that case there would not be order, the law would not prevail. Of course there were different times in August 1989. .22*

After the first wave of the East-German refugees, more were to follow; either in groups, or just families, or one by one, arriving in a constant stream, up to the border station. In the big upheaval the Hungarian frontier guards were checking the Austrian passports with their back to Hungary disregarding any previous agreements. The refugees were making their way, behind the back of the Hungarian frontier guards - sometimes almost pushing them over - rushing through the border.

The Austrian guests, waiting for their turn, moved politely to the side, allowing them a corridor for passage in the direction of St. Margarethen. Andreas Waha and Pal Csóka, on hearing the news, arrived quickly to the border. When the mayor saw what was going on, he returned instantly to the village, and called up all the hotels and restaurants asking for accommodation, for food and drink, and telephone abilities for the refugees, all expenses to be charged to the office of the mayor. He phoned the Embassy of West Germany, and in agreement he had ordered buses for the transporting the German citizens to Vienna. The buses were taking the refugees there, and the very same day over to Giessen, since they were all provided by valid West German passports, all issued in Hungary. . . .

At the border the organizers decided, that "happened, whatever happened" the program is to be continued, and so they turned back towards Sopronpuszta. There, the rest of the organizers were informed about the happenings from the radio news, since the thirty number of them were scattered over the vast area, and there was no possibilities of communication among them. There was no mobile telephone at the time. There was no CB-radio to our disposal, not even one fieldtelephone. Nobody realized that history was written. As a part of the official program Walburga von Habsburg and Laszlo Vass were talking in the name of the sponsors. The participants of the Common Fate Camp have read the invitation of the organizers in eight different languages. Gyorgy Konrad ("Thoughts at the border") had a talk, as well as Klaus Lange and Vinzenz von und zu Liechtenstein in the name of the Paneuropean Union.

A letter from Pastor Laszlo Tokes was read by Lukacs Szabó, who has smuggled it through the border, at the beginning of August. During the official program the organizers were consulting each other, on or off stage; on the fields. They were concerned what the expected consequences were to be. Since myself was busy with translating the speeches of the foreign guests, I was not able to leave the platform, but I learned about all the developments, because the news kept coming, and talking about it we transmitted them to the people. I remember myself asking the opinion of Gyorgy Konrad, what did he think, "shall we get into jail? Not for the

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Picnic, but in general. Shall we have the same fate as those in 56, or the Czechs in 68, or Walesa and his people? I remember his answer word by word, which were: *"I have a feeling that this time perhaps we have a chance, that perhaps real changes will come, and perhaps we shall escape the prison!"* During a speech which I did not have to translate, Carl-Gustaf Strohm, the reporter from "Die Welt", came up to me and asked, what is going to happen in Hungary? I answered that it will be seen within one or two years, we shall either get into the government or into the prison. He liked my answer, and remembers it to this day. Of course I did not feel so relaxed at the time as I appeared to him.

Nobody knew what will be the outcome of the events that took place at the border. In any case, an officer of high rank from the Frontier Guards said the following comment to Laszlo Magas during the same afternoon: *"This was not what we had agreed on, the matter will not end here!"* - this was all the encouragement we got so far. It was only Laszlo Vass, who gave some true encouragements, and who did not lose his composure, in spite the fact that within the program as a participant, he held the highest political rank as Secretary to the Minister of State, Pozsgay Imre, the person next to him. After some consultation with the frontier guards he has assured us that we shall be protected in case of a future rebuke. He gave us the secret telephone number of Pozsgay Imre, his own name card. In his speech he has even referred briefly to the events that had taken place at the border earlier in the afternoon.

With this, the program continued to progress according to the original plans, with Laszlo Vass participating, taking share in the responsibilities. The few thousand guests of the popular feast, gave not much thought to the arguments that were going on in the background - they did not pay much attention to it - they were in a high mood, enjoying the picnic. They were cooking the gulyas, roasting the sausages, gammon; there was beer, wine-and-soda, everything that could be wished for, while in the meantime the kilometer long barbed wire was slowly disappearing, having taken our slogan was taken very seriously: "dismantle it and take it" . Till heaven fell!

The force of heavens, a thunderstorm brought the Picnic to the end, which would have gone on till morning. I got into my car quickly and started off for home. This was the time when I noticed the mass of abandoned Trabant and Wartburg cars, with the marking of DDR number plates on them, along the roadside, in the direction of the prisons towards Kohida. The owners of the cars were not to return to them.

## **The aftermath**

The next day the guests and the organizers met during a lunch at Hotel Lővér. It was for the first time put into words, by Arpad Farsang junior, that *"...on the 19th of August history was written in Sopronpuszta."* But nobody could foretell the consequences.

Perhaps the officer of the Frontier Guard knew more, I said to myself, when I took the sit next to him during lunch, out of strategic purposes, in order to learn something from him. Answering to my question, what our fate was going to be, he answered the following ... *"we are going to receive a wooden corked disciplinary, from Budapest, which we are going to hide into a drawer!"* I learned that the so called wooden corked disciplinary is something that exists and at the same time it does not. Just like the wooden corked grenade used during a military exercise. It also exists, but does

not explode! Adam Michnik, who arrived late during the afternoon, has also sensed that something of great importance had happened. He was sorry that he had missed it, the previous day, and he would not stop pestering Mrs Rumpf to give him her Picnic T-shirt to have it as a relic from the memorable day.

The Western media was full of reports, while the local press did not represent itself at all on the site, and kept giving out second hand information. It was quite ridiculous that the reports that had appeared in Nepszabadsag about the Picnic were references made on the reports, written by the same newspaper's representative based in Bonn. Two parts of the reports were filled from the reports of the representative in Bonn: *"according to West German reports on Saturday, during the occasion of the gathering, named Pan-European Picnic, near to Sopron, a section of the border was opened in order to enable the arrival of the Austrian and other guests. This opportunity was used by many hundreds of East-German citizens awaiting by... ,14*

The news broadcasting team of the Television company from Győr, as it usually happened throughout the year at the occasion of each movement of the opposition, has arrived late. They arrived after four o'clock, taking five minutes to take a few shots, and they left. In the evening news of the TV there was only a flash of view seen of the crowd, and a hardly audible few words heard from the speech of Walburga von Habsburg. It was not a very informative broadcasting of the events.

But we had also different kind of experiences. With the help of the press we could call the attention to some interesting events that were following the Picnic. A few days after the 19th of August, soldiers from the Frontier Guards - together with armed members of the Worker Guards - were directing back all cars coming with the marking of DDR number plate at the point of diversion at Nagycenk. In the area of Kóphaza the people did not sleep because of the shootings that took place in the night. It was very useful to know the secret telephone number of Pozsgay Imre at this time.

We could manage, with his help, to bring down the team of Panorama Television to Sopron, which was lead by György Kalmar, and which made a full 24 minutes valid reportage about the situation around Sopron. Most likely as a result of this the Worker Guards were removed from their post. We could read a correct report of events in the Magyar Hírlap<sup>25</sup>, the Soproni Hírlap", the Otlet (Idea)"<sup>89</sup>". But what was going on in the background?

### **What was going on backstage?**

This is something that we do not know yet. In spite the fact that there was a conference organized in order to clear things by the "Pan-European Picnic '89 Foundation", at the tenth anniversary, in the Pannonia Med Hotel on the 18th - 19th of August<sup>28</sup>. The motto chosen for the conference was a quotation from Thomas Sowell: "There are two ways to tell the whole truth. Either anonymously, or at a later date." In spite of this no clear picture has emerged concerning the extent of international conciliation, neither to the East or to the West direction. Were the Hungarian authorities aware of the German intention of making the break through? What would have happened if the existing balance within the power breaks, and moves towards the good of the orthodox communist wing? What would have happened if the coup, against Gorbachov, takes place two years earlier, in August 1989? We could go on asking more and more questions, since very often we were receiving contradictory

answers from the persons in control at the time. We heard that Miklos Nemeth in the spring of 1989 had a discussion with Gorbachev" indirectly" concerning the plan of changes in Hungary.

It was also said, that the political leadership gave conscious support to Pozsgay Imre and to the Picnic, considering the whole occasion a kind of test. Were they curious to see, how Berlin, Praga, Bucarest and Moscow is going to respond?" But what would have happened to the organizers of the event if the above mentioned "friendly" countries did not response favourable?

If it was a test, why had they forgotten to bring it to the notice of Arpad Bella, whose soldiers alone were armed with live ammunition? If they fire, then today "*The place would not be a place of memories, but a place of memorial at the border..*" (quotation from Bella Arpad) for the shame, not for the glory of Hungary. According to the officer of the highest rank in Sopron "...*It was not what we have agreed on*". Hence, he was not happy with the break through; he would have rather gone against it.

Were his bosses thinking similarly to him? Most probably they were, because a force of arms were ordered to stand by, with truncheons and other technical devices ready for intervention

On" the other hand it was forbidden for them, by the highest, national commander, to stay closer than a kilometer to the area where the event took place, since it was a civil gathering". This way was hard for them to hold up any forbidden frontier crossing!

If the Picnic was merely a test, and there was no displeasure indicated from the above mentioned capitals, then why did the firing took place? Why did Kurt Werner Schulz had to die? Why did the "battle" took place at Kóphaza and Sopronpuszta, on the 23th of August? Who mobilized the Worker Guards? Was it an overreacting action of the local authorities, or were they centrally ordered? Or was it that Honecker needed some reassurance? Since everyone was keeping an eye on everything. A delegation had come from Berlin, from the Stasi, to make an observation of the possible sites for the Picnic, within the area. It was ten years later that we learned about it, though. If things were progressing according to the schedule on the border on the 19th of August, then why was a charge brought against Bella Arpad? Why were the procedure of charges not completed which were made against him? Are they still on? It seems as if the central orders were never reaching the person to whom it was addressed. Was it that out of precautions the orders could not be written down, or have they got lost on the way? Or was it due simple to a very unstable situation, where the middlemen, out of precaution lived a double life? Of course what else could have been expected of any of them. when the orders given out were in contradiction to the order of the written law; which was still very much in existence, though they were issued at an earlier date?

And yet, the Hungarian government was already having a very clear view, concerning the problem of the refugees at the time, even from an earlier time than the idea of the Picnic has occured. Alexander Arnot, the Ambassador of West Germany had invited Istvan Horvath, the Minister of Internal Affairs, for a meeting, where he inquired about the intentions of the Hungarian side about the problem». The Minister of Internal Affairs promised to give a written answer, which was prepared by Pallagi, vice-minister, and was sent to the ambassador well before the Picnic", The document was stating concrete data about the various possibilities of judgements about the statues of the refugees. According to the Refugee-Pact of Geneva, there

were refugee camps to be established. In order to materialize this plan though, the consideration of various, relevant, international agreements were necessary. There was a comment though in the answer, which was saying that. . ." *our country does not wish to become a channel for the East-European refugees.*"

In the meantime, on the 8th of August 1989, the Vice-Attorney General had given out certain official directions to the local attorneys, how to act in the case when refugees were caught in the act of attempting to cross the border. If the "act of crime" was committed for a convincing reason, rebuke had to be employed, and all prosecutions had to be dismissed. Those prosecutions which were already in progress had to be stopped". The "convincing reasons" by the way was to serve an excellent excuse for ambivalence! Two days later, in connection with the same matter, there were other official letters received by the local attorneys, sent by the Department of Highest Attorney of Anti - State Matters this time. The letter said that concerning the orders received earlier, they were in full agreement with the Ministry of internal-, and with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was also stated that the Refugee-Pact of Geneva will be announced, presumable, on the 1st of October<sup>36</sup>. All legal orders; concerning all laws and the rights of the refugees, will come into effect from this date on. All other laws; concerning in- and outward migrations, as well as passport matters were come into effect from the 1st of January 1990.

There were pressures weighing on the government, coming from all different directions. It is known only by a very few that during the last days of August, Sandor Lezsák - with the request of full discretion- had visited Laszlo Magas at Sopron. There were certain plans about transporting masses of German refugees to Sopron. Lezsak was asking for advice to help him find a suitable place for accommodating them. Most probably the comment of Istvan Horvath, the Minister of Internal Affairs, was referring to this matter, written in "Magyar Nemzet", on the 5th of September<sup>37</sup>. For the bus transportation the area of the football ground at Brennberg and the parking area of the stone quarry at Fertorakos were chosen. For the railway transportation the station of Kopháza was chosen. These areas are situated not further than a few hundred meters from the national border. Finally these plans had not been realized, but obviously such plans were speeding up the decisions of the government the same way as the Picnic did.

It is not easy to judge whether the time between the Picnic and the decision of the government that was brought about on the 11th of September, was short or long? Though in retrospect everyone seems to be very clever and very well informed. In spite of this, it would be good to know, that in reality what was known, and by whom it was known? Who were receiving orders, and from whom? What kind of reassurances were given, and to whom? I have a notion that the advises given to all were similar to those types which we know well from our past history. To recite the words of Janos, the Archbishop of Esztergom: "*You must not be afraid about murdering the queen, enough if all of you agree I do not oppose it.*" Below a certain level such kind of information were received. But, at which level was everything known? How many scenarios were in existence? For us, there was only one known. For the government probably more; each of which had a hopeful, favorable ending concerning the fate of the government. It will take probably many years before we shall have answers to any of these questions, since even the documents that they were available are closed down.

It is no wish for sensational news or desire to make charges against anyone

from my part. Merely I would like to know the facts, so that we, and especially the future generations may learn a lesson from it. Nobody would aim at, in the knowledge of the facts, to stir war for merits, or to turn the politicians of the time against the organizers of the events, or against the soldiers, or against each other. This cannot be a target, since the summer of 1989 proved to be such a rare, and such a highly valuable moment in the Hungarian history. There was a cause, for the sake of which, - at least in deeds, if not completely in spirit - there was a co-operation between the political leaders, the armed forces, and the opposition. As it happens, it was also in the interest of others than ourselves, the Germans.

The map of Europe would have been transformed also without the Pan European Picnic, or without the decision of the Hungarian government, announced on the 11th. of September. Maybe it would have taken place at a later date, perhaps in a different way, perhaps in a more bloody way! Let us rejoice in the fact, that though as "unconscious trouble makers", we did take part in a very essential episode of the time of changes. It would be good to know, though, what powers were pulling the strings, what was going on in the backstage.

Then one day, when the archives will be opened, the future historians may decide whether it was the case of a cleverly built "Byzantian" solution, or a so called Hungarian botched job. Perhaps the truth lies between the two versions?



