

HHAA Dec 07 newsletter, part 2

A Tribute to Margit Bessenyei

(This is excerpts from a speech given at the Daly mansion last summer by Ernest Szechenyi. See the entire text of the speech on our website, www.hungarianhorses.org)

For my brother Otto and me, 1954 was a time of innocence. The Bitterroot Stock Farm seemed infinitely large to two young boys! Crossing the many clear, rapidly gushing creeks was remarkable. Seeing the noble, majestic Hungarian thoroughbreds [SIC] was truly and positively unforgettable! Margit was the daughter of COUNT ANTHONY SIGRAY and HARRIET DALY.

Harriet, or Hattie, was the daughter of MARCUS DALY. Margit, a direct heir to the Daly mansion and to the Bitterroot Stock Farm, bought out her relatives and became the sole owner. Margit escaped from Hungary at the end of World War II. Because her mother was an American, Margit was allowed to enter the USA soon after her escape. Some time later, she learned that the U. S. Cavalry was going to disband its horses-including the Hungarian ones captured in Europe. Margit arranged to buy eight lovely mares and this is how the Hungarian Horses wound up in Hamilton, Montana. Margit became an active and supportive member of the Hamilton community. She gave land to the humane society and organized the Bitterroot Trail Ride on the Bitterroot Stock Farm. Margit knew me before I knew her. I say this because Margit played an integral part in my family's successful escape from Communist Hungary shortly before I was born. Margit had been my mother's best friend in their youthful years in Hungary. Like my father, Margit had always loved horses. My father was the epitome of the equestrian, having grown up on horseback and having served as a Hungarian Hussar Officer. He was a member of the HONOR GUARD of Hungary's Regent, Admiral Horthy.

Margit employed my father not only because of her long-time friendship with my parents but also because of his expertise with horses. (I recall the day we drove up to one of the Hungarian horses on the hill in Chapman's Landing - Margit's farm on the Potomac--located in Maryland. To my greatest amazement, the horse stood at rigid attention until the Hungarian hymnus was finished being sung.) My father fought in the last cavalry charge on the Russian front, and was captured near the Don River in Ukraine, along with 10,000 other prisoners of whom only 100 were eventually released. They were transported back to a prison camp in Eastern Hungary. ,,,, *[He made it back home and the family escaped into Austria.]*... Our family sought refuge in a nunnery, only to be surrounded and captured by Russian soldiers. You see, after WW II, Austria was divided into the American, British, French, and Russian zones.

My mother was, understandably, desperate, when she found out that my father was scheduled to be returned to Communist Hungary, probably to face a death sentence by hanging. Fortunately, she was able to contact the Americans in Vienna. CLAIBORNE PELL, a Senator from Rhode Island, worked for the C.I.C. (Central Intelligence Corps) there. He personally knew Countess Gladys Vanderbilt Szechenyi from Newport, RI. When he heard about my family, he entered the Russian zone to meet them. He soon

returned with a case of champagne for the Russian guards. While the guards were all in a drunken stupor, Claiborne Pell helped my family escape to the American zone. Margit was the distant financial sponsor of that campaign-she was the one who had bought the champagne! Our family found refuge in the house of distant relatives in Salzburg where

I was born on May 21, 1948. An American Army doctor had warned my mother that either she or the baby would probably not survive. A C-section saved both of our lives, but my mother later developed a systemic blood infection that affected her entire body. Word of this got to Margit here in Hamilton, and she immediately sent my mother some lifesaving antibiotics. This was quite a feat, since antibiotics had just recently been introduced for medicinal use. After a brief stay in Belgium, our family immigrated to the US. Margit eventually hired my father to help her take care of her horses. His expertise was very useful not only in handling the horses, but in training and riding them as well.

He rode Margit's horses in competitions and won her a first prize in an obstacle course event in New Jersey. Later he was also in charge of several horses Margit kept on her estate in Maryland. I will always remember Margit with immense respect, love, and gratitude. She saved my family's lives and the lives of the Hungarian horses. She was a true American. She believed in the sanctity of life and in Jeffersonian democracy.