

The Tone of the Monument

Facts and Thoughts about the Hungarian Iron Curtain

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Introduction

The interoperability or closure of borders, the free movement of people, their search for the right way in the world is not a political, economic, or safety issue but rather a philosophical question. It expresses what we think about the integrity of human existence.

Now when we are celebrating the abolition of „the world of closed frontiers“ – which had determined our fate for decades –, when we commemorate the drama of isolation we also must reflect on the question: What do we think about the „closing of gates“ these days? What do we think about the human beings who are looking for their own and their families' happiness? What do we think about the free choice of where to live?

Standing in front of the collapsed Iron Curtain we must face certain questions:

Is there any kind of substantial difference between the border which restrains the citizens from exercising the right to choose the place where they want to live, in the hope of finding humanistic living conditions, and the border which blocks the way for people who are escaping from the threat of death or who simply try to live better? The former is to maintain the pretence of the fake values of a political hegemony, the latter is to protect the putative or real comfort of life, both of them done by inhuman means.

Is it ethical to exclude poverty-stricken masses from the possession of economic resources on the basis of security reasons? Is it not cynical selfishness to defend the lifestyle privileges violently with reference to the safety risk? Does the Christian ethic give anyone the chance to deny mercy to the fallen? On the other hand: Can an ethic be called “Christian” on the basis of which this can be regularly done?

Are the masses who are looking for a new homeland fully responsible for the lack of their social integration? Is it ethical to accept the work-power of those masses who are looking for their place in the world, while their social acceptance is spectacularly denied? Is it acceptable that the right of welfare and safety is not equal for everyone in the world?

Today the Iron Curtain does not belong to the past, but it is a welcome part of the present in Hungary. We celebrate the fall of the Iron Curtain along our western border, but we are also enthusiastic about the Iron Curtain along our southern boundary in the name of the official point of view which considers these two phenomena as being opposite to each other.

The often unreliable remains of inhuman horror are presented causing an adventurous shudder, and the Iron Curtain raised on our southern borders, blocking the way for the masses of people who want to flee to a better world is seen with causeless dread mixed with confidence.

The position of the old, demolished Iron Curtain and the newly erected Iron Curtain, the description of the recent conditions must urge us to consider the detectable phenomena from a higher point of view.

These thoughts are intended as a short introduction to the following photo report.

The memories as prints of the past – judged according to our best moral conviction – are the basis of our identity. We cannot choose between them: glorious and shameful reminiscences are equally important. Though they may be bright or dark: the crucial point is to evaluate them – as much as possible – on the basis of a fixed moral compass.



Fig. 1: Border guard on duty in the 1970s

1. Description of the current situation



Fig. 2: The Hungarian part of the Iron Curtain was 260 km at the Austrian, and 621 km long at the former Yugoslavian (Slovenian, Croatian, Serbian) border



Fig. 3: Typical section of the border installation (photo taken at the pan-European picnic memorial)



Fig. 4: Original view of the border



Fig. 5: Nature has reclaimed the space once occupied by the technical barrier

Figs. 6–8: Andau bridge crossed by approx. 70,000 refugees in November 1956; reconstructed in 1996 with a row of memorial statues.



We can find different kinds of memorials representing the political and technical isolation along the Iron Curtain. There are authentic reconstructions at authentic locations of objects belonging to the historical and dramatic events, and funny places with strange collections of relics of the Iron Curtain age:

Problem 1

As visible in the above examples, some of the memorials are without any contextualisation of the historical facts, which reduces their overall effectiveness. Even worse, many of them lack credibility. Because of this, the visitor does not get any idea of the real cruelty and inhumanity of the Iron Curtain.

From Rajka (village at the Austrian-Hungarian-Slovakian border) to as far as Gyékényes (a village at the southern border) a hiking trail (Iron Curtain trail) was established along the border using parts of existing hiking trails.

Problem 2

Due to a lack of maintenance funds the “Iron Curtain Trail Visitors Center” was closed and the “Iron Curtain” exhibition dismantled. It was opened inaugurated in 2015, but no longer receives visitors.

Along the Iron Curtain Trail there are many natural and archaeological sites, architectural landmarks, cemeteries, remains of dramatic historic and military incidents, etc. The trail is much more a route of remembrance than only a path that follows the former Iron Curtain.

Problem 3

There is a great diversity of artefacts, memorials, and sites along the Iron Curtain path. These could be bound together to strengthen the communities’ historical identity and ethical conviction.

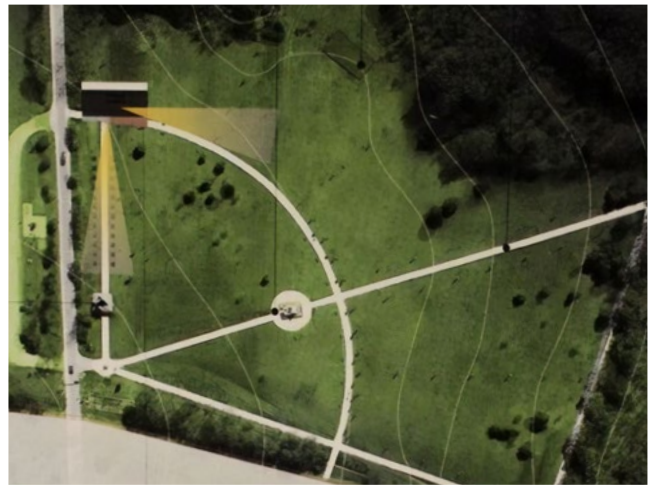
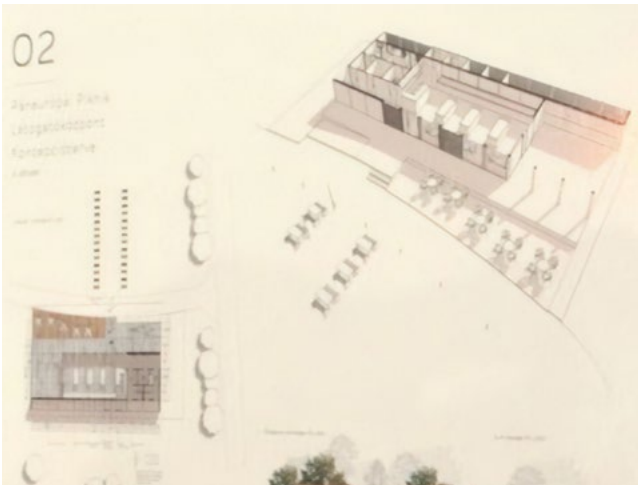
Problem 4

The past is the present: the Iron Curtain has returned.



Figs. 9–10: Original photo and the monument commemorating the border-opening ceremony of 1989

Fig. 11: Pan-European picnic 1989



Figs. 12–15: The “Pan-European Picnic Memorial Park” now and developments for the near future. The sites of spontaneous events often become sites of official celebrations devoid of meaning.



Figs. 16–18: Authentic reconstruction of the three different periods of the technical barrier at Hegykő, at its original location



Fig. 19: Requisites of the Iron Curtain as fairground attraction in Felsőcsatár



Figs. 20–22: “Welcome to the members of the border guard who served at the western border between 1957 and 1992!” Funny “reconstruction” of the technical installations 350–800 m away from the original barrier and the collection of Iron curtain relics in Felsőcsatár



Fig. 23: Bizarre military collection with wooden canon (of 1848?) at Felsőcsatár



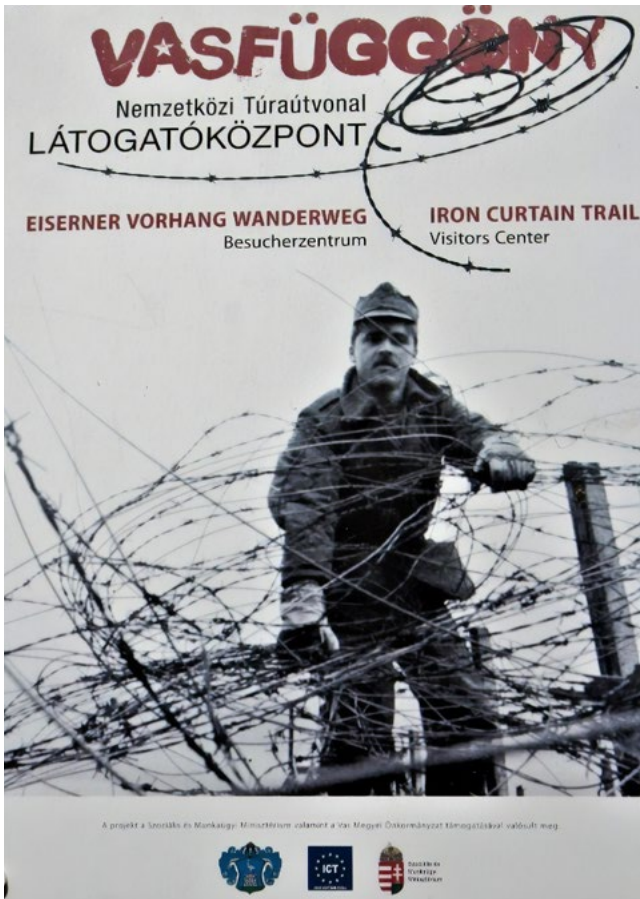
Figs. 24–25: The trail crosses two national parks with interesting flora and fauna and connects numerous unique landscapes, geographical specialities, exhibitions of handicraft traditions, etc. The path also connects many buildings, monuments, museums and attractions. Though these are not all directly related to the Iron Curtain story, some of them remind visitors of the former division of Europe. The EuroVelo 13 (Iron Curtain) bike path more or less follows the border:



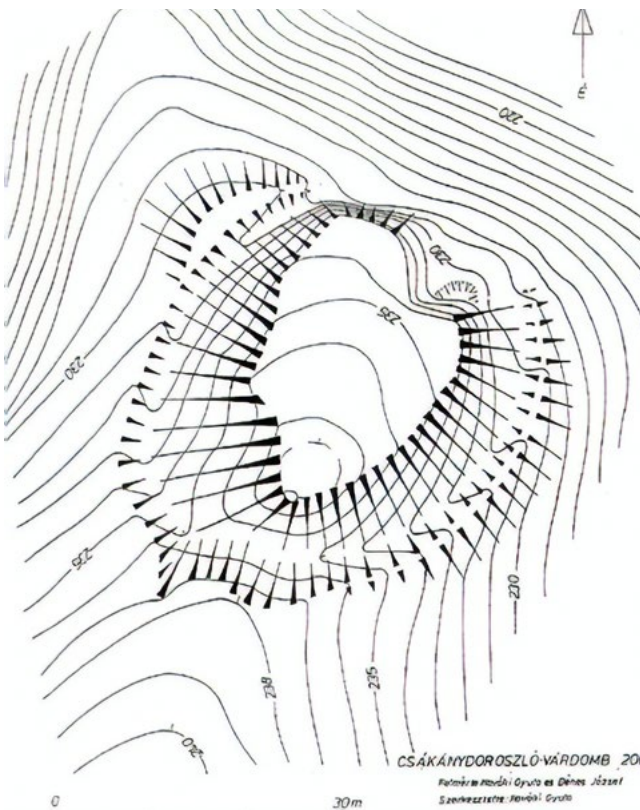
Fig. 26: Near Velem, along an 8-km-long stretch of the former location of the Iron Curtain, the trail is identifiable only by an inconspicuous sign.



Fig. 27: Írottkö / Szálkő – Geschriebenstein



Figs. 28-29: The closed visitors' center and its sign



Figs. 30-31: Csákánydoroszló, motte



Fig. 32: Forest house near Bajánsenye built 1833



Fig. 33: Signposting to World War II soldiers' graves at Sopronkövesd

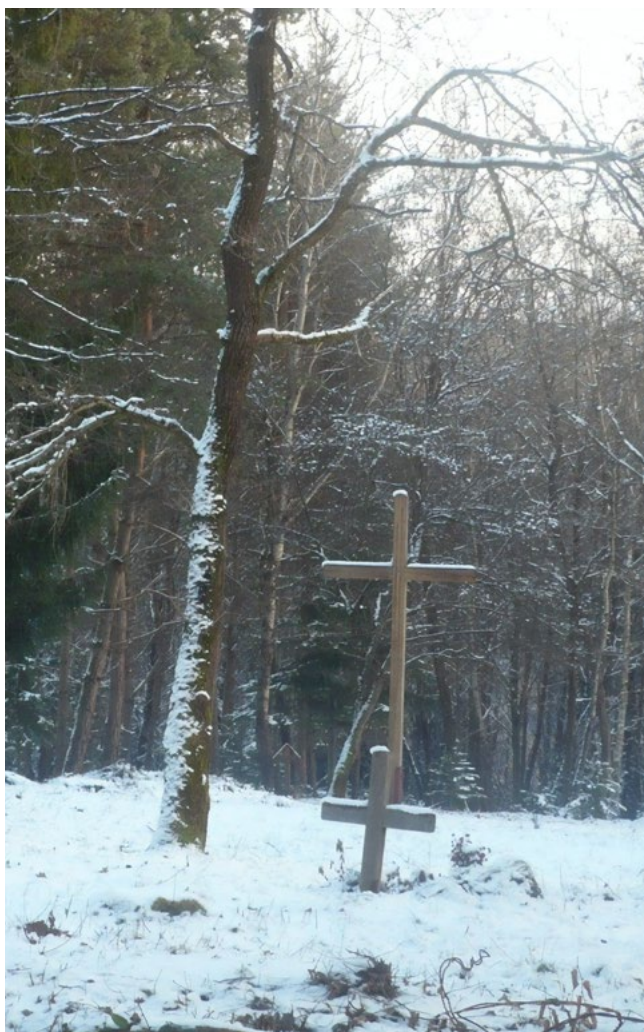


Fig. 34: Cemetery at Felsőrönök



Fig. 35: Magyarbükös, remains of the crucifix of a disappeared village. The inhabitants of the village escaped to Austria during a night of fierce deportation in 1946.



Fig. 36: St. Ladislaus chapel at Répcevis, remaining sanctuary of a disappeared church



Fig. 37: Border guards' abandoned bunker at Óriszentpéter

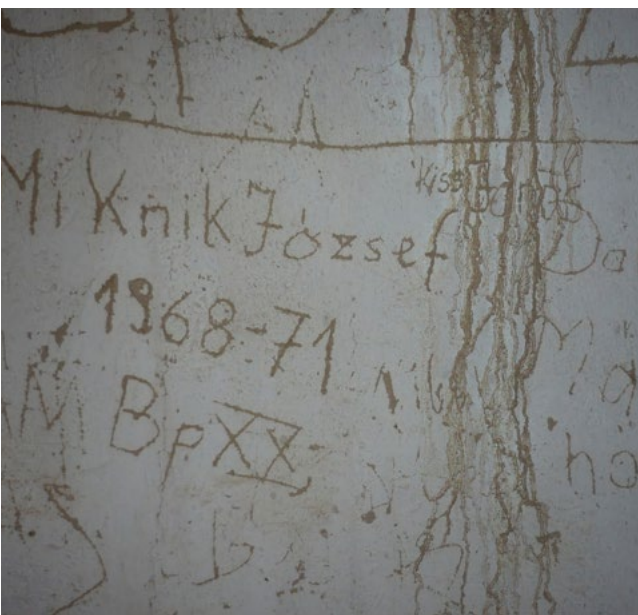


Fig. 38: Border guards' graffiti in the basement



Fig. 39: A new Iron Curtain along the southern border



2. Assessment of the emerged situation

The „Iron Curtain” – separating the democratic and the despotic world – became a symbol of inhumanity. It is an unforgettable part of our past which has to fill us with shame and reminds us of an evil political regime that treated people attempting to cross the border as criminals, not as free human beings.

Problem 5

The Hungarian society – in spite of its grievous experiences – is deeply fragmented in the assessment of the phenomenon of the Iron Curtain. Its moral compass does not guide it in this question.

That is why the pages of our history cannot be simply light or dark. Our glorious memories and our shameful experiences direct our acts as well. When we see the traces, the memories of the „Iron Curtain”, we can never forget „that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”. This should always guide our acts.



Figs. 40–41: The construction below is hardly distinguishable from the one that was dismantled in 1989. Many Hungarians see a special kind of natural continuity in the history of border fences.



Fig. 42: Constructing such a cruel, dispassionate technical barrier at the border is considered by many Hungarians as a decision to be celebrated.



Figs. 43–44: A piece of the razor mesh from the southern border of Hungary (2015) used as an award or a cool gift

Picture Credits

Fig. 1: <https://happytovisit.com/Budapest/Communism-in-Hungary-Life-behind-the-Iron-Curtain-in-Budapest/tour-t4921-c190>

Fig. 2: https://www.google.com/search?q=vasfuggony&source=lnms&tbn=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahU-KEWjN89_y8bjAhXNwosKHTMXBQUQ_AUIESgB&biw=1680&bih=936#imgrc=ol0QpEYfU3GmlM

Figs. 3, 5, 7, 8, 16–23, 25–28, 44–46: photo Tibor Kuslits

Fig. 4: https://mandiner.hu/cikk/20141115_a_magyar_vasfuggony_a_hatarzar_es_aldozatai

Fig. 6: <http://embermesek.blogspot.com/2014/04/hid-szabadsag-fele-az-andaui-hid.html>

Fig. 9: <https://cyberpress.hu/horn-gyula-emlektura-vasarnap-a-volt-vasfuggony-menten/>

Fig. 10: https://www.wikiwand.com/hu/Horn_Gyula

Fig. 11: https://www.google.com/search?q=pan+eu-ropean+picnic+1989&client=firefox-b-d&source=lnms&tbn=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEWimvOXVtsbjAhXOLIsKHXXQCCkQ_AUIESgB&biw=1680&bih=936#imgrc=pC5j1Ud-FSWUoM

Fig. 12: <https://www.utazitthon.hu/latnivalo/sopronk%C5%91hida/paneuropai-piknik-emlekhely-sopronkohida-19596>

Fig. 13: <https://cyberpress.hu/latogatokozpont-epulhet-2019-re-a-paneuropai-piknik-emlekparkba/>

Fig. 14: <https://cyberpress.hu/latogatokozpont-epulhet-2019-re-a-paneuropai-piknik-emlekparkba/>

Fig. 15: <https://www.sopronitema.hu/hirek/varosi-hirek/uj-latogatokozpont>

Fig. 24: <https://www.alon.hu/vasfuggony-nemzetkozi-turautvonali-avato-velemben>

Fig. 29: <http://vasfuggony.blogspot.com/search/label/%C3%8Drott%C5%91>

Fig. 30: <https://www.google.com/search?q=Cs%C3%A1k%C3%A1nydorozl%C3%B3+Magyarbuks+V%C3%A1rdomb&client=firefox-b-d&source=lnms&tbn=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahU->

[KEwjr_cmYibrjAhW0AxAIHXc-AkIQ_AUI-EigD&biw=1138&bih=545#imgrc=f-624LIB4lyYUM](http://vasfuggony.blogspot.com/2011/03/kotormanyi-hegy-bajansenye.html)

Fig. 31: <http://termeszeto.blogspot.com/2015/04/kockaslilom-tortenelem-arnyekaban.html>

Fig. 32: <http://vasfuggony.blogspot.com/2011/03/kotormanyi-hegy-bajansenye.html>

Fig. 33: <http://vasfuggony.blogspot.com/search/label/Sopronk%C3%B6vesd>

Fig. 34: <http://vasfuggony.blogspot.com/search/label/R%C3%B6n%C3%B6k>

Fig. 35: <http://vasfuggony.blogspot.com/2010/10/magyarbuks-ungarisch-bieling.html>

Fig. 36: <http://vasfuggony.blogspot.com/search/label/R%C3%A9pcevis>

Fig. 37: <http://vasfuggony.blogspot.com/search/label/%C3%8Drott%C5%91>

Fig. 38: <http://vasfuggony.blogspot.com/2011/03/kotormanyi-hegy-bajansenye.html>

Fig. 39: https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/D%C3%A9li_hat%C3%A1r%C3%A1r_Magyarorsz%C3%A1gn#/media/F%C3%A1jl:HU-Southern_Border_Barrier.svg

Fig. 40: <https://m.dailyhunt.in/news/india/english/60seconds-now-epaper-sixsec/on+this+day+construction+of+the+berlin+wall+began-newsid-94532063>

Fig. 41: <https://uj szo.com/kulfold/magyarorszag-kesz-a-roman-hataron-is-keritest-epiteni-a-menekultek-ellen>