

## The Day I Held the Iron Curtain In My Hand

By Abi King | Austria

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### The Road to Sopron

Sometimes things go wrong in life. The printer at the car hire company breaks, the sat nav doesn't work, the journey is longer than you've been told and you turn up very late.

Sometimes other things go wrong in life. You're shot at by soldiers while walking in a field, you're banned from living with your family and the very act of trying to cross the border that contains you brands you a criminal in a regime reliant on torture and execution.

And sometimes those two worlds collide.

With my passenger comfortably seated, I turned on the ignition, apologised, silently cursed the car hire company, apologised again and drove away.

### The Winter Sun

My passenger spoke little. A right hand turn here, a straight on there.

We drove past green fields and the residential roads of St Margarathen in Austria, the winter sun piercing the windscreen, forcing me to squint.



Hi, I'm Abi, a doctor turned writer who's worked with Lonely Planet, the BBC, Nat Geo Traveller, UNESCO and more and travelled to over 60 countries.

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"This road," said my passenger, Alexander Wind, "was built by the Romans around two thousand years ago. That is why it is straight."

We drive past a school.

"The Romans marched their labourers along this road.

"Then the Nazis marched the Jews to the camp on that hill."

I glance in the rear view mirror but the sunlight splinters my sight.

"And then in nineteen-eighty-nine," says Wind, his Austro-German accent separating out each syllable like a marching military parade, "more than six hundred people escaped from Hungary and walked, with nothing, along this road."

He's talking, of course, about the fall of the Iron Curtain.

The real fall, the first exodus. The unprecedented event that took place on the 19<sup>th</sup> August 1989, three months ahead of the fall of the Berlin wall.

And he should know what he's talking about. He was there.

He's talking, of course, about the fall of the Iron Curtain. And he should know, he was there



These days, *there*, is an unwatched, almost unmarked piece of ground where grass runs on either side of that straight Roman road. The only barrier resembles a giant staple ploughed into the earth, it's a traffic restriction for heavy vehicles.

And as for personnel, we are alone.



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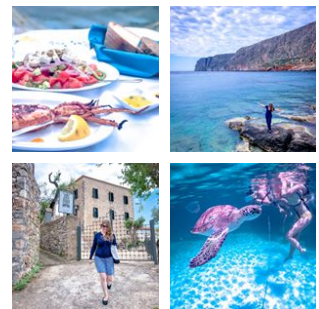


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An empty watchtower sits blind on the horizon. A summer pagoda hibernates on the lawn.

The whole thing feels absurd – and a long, long, long way away from where I began my journey in Istanbul. Back then, I had assumed that the Iron Curtain was an ideological divide, apart from that notorious wall in Berlin. I hadn't realised that barbed wire, armed guards and a Soviet SZ-100 signalling system with 24 volt electric cables divided Hungary from Austria as late as 1989.

"I came here with my friend of Holland," says Wind. "Just to look and to make some pictures."

He trembles.

"And the soldiers, they took their guns and they shot."

We walk around the information boards, one by one, my soul turning cobalt with cold. I force myself to imagine this place in the sticky sweet heat of summer, in the time when blonde bubblegum perms and Boy George crops ruled, when jean waistbands were high and trainers bright white.

I have to picture myself here in 1989 at the "pan-European picnic" in August.

## **"And the soldiers, they took their guns and they shot."**

After 40 years of watchtowers and guards, a symbolic, controlled border opening was supposed to take place as a gesture of harmony in Europe. A small group of pre-approved, registered delegates had planned to eat, drink and pose for political photographs in the sun.

Change was afoot in the Soviet bloc. A new man, Gorbachev had mentioned words like perestroika and glasnost. Money was increasingly scarce. And in Hungary, a problem was developing.

The steel barbed wire that defined the Iron Curtain was rusting away – and Russia no longer had the funds to replace it. Budapest decided not to foot the bill.

The world looked on nervously. Russian troops remained on Hungarian soil and many remembered the hundreds who died at the bullets of the Soviets in 1956 after students protested in the streets.

Yet perhaps enough time had passed for a new generation to forget the punishment of the past.



The day of the picnic arrived. Instead of one small group of delegates, the Hungarian border guards witnessed tens upon hundreds of men, women and children walk up towards them. Men, women and children who they had been ordered to shoot if required.

Alexander Wind raps his knuckles against the information board. He begins to sob.

“This man,” he says, pointing to the photograph. “It is this man that I...”

He wipes his eyes.

“Árpád Bella,” he weeps again. I read the sign, identifying Bella as the Hungarian Lieutenant Colonel in charge of the border that day.

## Men, women and children who they had been ordered to shoot if required.

“I have learned Hungarian in order to meet him and to try to understand why,” says Wind. “Why he did what he did.

“He had been ordered to shoot. And he did not.”

Over six hundred people fled in those three hours. They left behind their cars, their possessions, everything, running, striding and staggering through the border crossing and along that Roman road towards St Margarethen.

Within weeks, over 10 000 refugees had fled from East Germany to West through Hungary and then Austria.

Within months, the Berlin Wall fell.

Later, my fingertips return to life as we warm up in a pub in St Margarethen. Alexander Wind shows me newspaper cuttings, interviews and photographs of himself as a younger man. He unwraps crumpled white plastic to show barbed wire the colour of peat.

"Break it down and take it with you," says Wind. "That was what they said to us that day."

I pick up the piece of the former iron curtain and turn it over.

It's fragile, it crumbles a little but its points can still sting.

I'm overcome with a sense of gratitude. For my freedoms and for my opportunities – for the chance to travel along the iron route and to visit this place and hear about this historic day.

But I still have questions. Plenty of questions.

**"Break it down and take it with you," says Wind. "That was what they said to us that day."**

Written in my notebook is a quote from the memorial:

"These are the tearful moments of happiness on the other side of the border – on the field of freedom. These pictures undoubtedly prove what autocracy meant to the nations of Eastern Europe. One's home (surrounded by the Iron Curtain) could only be left with such happiness when there is no freedom, only tyranny."

It's the kind of statement that makes sense at first glance but that falls apart later on.

While soothing, it's too easy to summarise that oppression and communism blighted the "east" while freedom and democracy illuminated the "west."

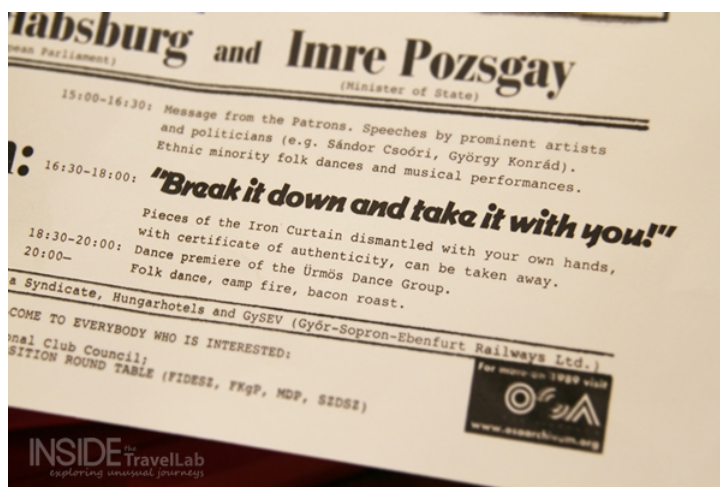
The thousands who crossed the iron curtain came from East Germany, not Hungary and not from the rest of the Soviet bloc. When the first hole appeared in the Iron Curtain, most Hungarians stayed put.

I was clearly missing a part of the puzzle.

A part I went on to find in Berlin.


A part that lives in the shadow of perhaps the world's most infamous wall.

*To be continued...*



Find the previous post here: [What is communism? Prague tries to explain.](#)

This article forms [part of the Iron Route Project](#) which could not have taken place without [the help of InterRail](#). A huge thank you also to the Austrian Tourist Board and the Burgenland Tourist Board for helping with this stage of the journey. And of course, the biggest thank you of all to Mr Alexander Wind for spending the day with me on the road to Sopron.



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### About the Author

Hi, I'm Abi, a doctor turned writer who's worked with Lonely Planet, the BBC, UNESCO and more. Let's travel more and think more.

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