Report From Hungary

by George Friedman - June 11, 2025

My ongoing trip to Europe has brought me to Hungary, the country in which I was born. My profession requires me to be clinical and distant about the nations we study, but it is an oddity of American life that those who have come here or whose families come here retain an element of affection for the places they left. I say it's odd because, for the most part, the life they left behind was unpleasant enough to make them leave. Immigrants from Ireland or Italy, even after several generations, have those feelings. My wife, who is an official member of the General Society of Mayflower Descendants, is still fascinated by the royal family. (Later generations of her family immigrated to Australia, where she was born.) I must add if I may that it gives me supreme pleasure that a Friedman is listed on a chart showing descendants of William Bradford, once the governor of Plymouth colony. So it is that I choose not to discuss Hungary, my homeland, but the United States, my beloved home.

My mother and father survived Hitler's camps, while my sister, 11 years older than me, was sheltered in the Swiss Embassy. It was rare that the core of one's family survived, and yet mine did. I was born in 1949 and was regarded as our revenge on Hitler. He was dead, but they went on. It was an odd burden to bear.

Six months after I was born, my father received a message saying he was to be arrested by Soviet authorities and their Hungarian comrades for being anti-communist. At that point, the extent of my father's ideology was that life was better than death, so we fled Hungary. My parents hired smugglers who one night took us in a rubber raft across the Danube to Czechoslovakia, also under Soviet control, and on to Vienna. It was a more complex and dangerous journey than I can tell, because I was shielded while growing up from the terrors of the time and had to piece it together much later.

What I do know is that upon our arrival in Vienna, we were taken to a place run by an American charity – a miracle that I was always reminded of. The Americans first gave us a feast, as it must have seemed to them, then let us bathe and put on clean clothing, after which we were examined by a doctor who treated wounds from our passage. We then were given a room to live in and kept there for over a year. The United States had quotas for the number of immigrants who could be admitted in any one year from any country, and during that time background checks were run on us. (I'll be damned if I know how they could possibly check our backgrounds in the ruins of Europe at that time.)

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At that point in history, limiting immigration was necessary; there are only so many different cultures a nation can manage at one time. That immigration is essential to America is true. That the rate at which immigration must take place and be managed is also true. After World War II, the U.S. let in countless European immigrants – out of kindness, yes, but also out of national interest – in a managed and thoughtful manner, always aware of matters of security and stability. I understand why we had to wait for a visa. I'm grateful that it was granted as quickly as it was. No nation can simply open its borders to migrants and remain stable.

When our wait was over, we were loaded on a U.S. Navy transport ship and delivered to New York. My father quickly found a job as a printer, which he'd been in Budapest, easy in a booming economy, and we found an apartment in the Bronx. The Bronx was a pressure cooker for immigrants then, a place filled with poor people from all over the world. It was a difficult and even dangerous place. But its public schools were merciless in making us Americans. I remember that we were taught to sing Christian hymns (I still remember some of them) during assembly. It did me no harm to hear the story of Christmas. I remained Jewish but was reminded in P.S. 67 that this was America, and most Americans were Christian. The public schools were designed at the time to face reality. Nine Nobel Prize winners from my generation came from the Bronx. We did well, and our parents' joy of being in America was not undermined by knowing that this was a different and demanding place. We knew we were in a new place, and we retained our identity in spite of singing "Onward Christian Soldiers." The immigrants in the Bronx weren't fragile, and our parents reminded us of who we were – strangers in a strange and wonderful land. The Bronx was painful because it made me tough, denied me the right to self-pity, gave me the power to be what I wanted, and taught me the most important lesson: This is America, not Hungary, and America doesn't permit weakness or self-pity.

I say this as an immigrant who cannot fathom what is going on in his own country. The only people who can claim to come from families native to America are Native Americans. Everyone else came to a land where they succeeded or failed by their own efforts. Immigrants are at the heart of this republic, and given certain troubling demographic trends, they are essential. But the system must limit the immigrants to the amount that can be managed, integrated into America with their pasts recalled and treasured but no longer defined by them. The crisis of immigration I see today is that the quotas are gone, and the pressure cooker of assimilation is gone as well. It is not a kindness to allow strangers in America to remain strangers, instead of Americans with fond memories of who they were and pleasure in who they have become. I do not blame the immigrants. I blame a misplaced kindness that seeks to make immigrants pay the price of admission, thereby leaving them strangers in a strange land.

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I know this is not an article on Hungarian geopolitics, but for what it's worth, the visit caused me to remember my own life and the way a child who only spoke Hungarian became an American. Coming to America was a privilege that promised great things and made great demands. I was in Hungary as I was watching the chaos in Los Angeles. It drove home to me that we have denied the immigrant experience to this generation's migrants. We have denied them the pressure cooker of quotas and the pain and pleasure of becoming American. We need them, as we need all immigrants whose offspring now constitute America. Those who say that we don't need immigrants are not facing the reality of our demographics. Those who say we cannot demand change in the immigrants' souls are sadists pretending to be warm-hearted. This is agony on all sides, and it must stop. The process of maintaining America has always depended on immigration, and the pain of the Mayflower immigrants, and my own pain as a Hungarian immigrant, and the pain of the Mexican immigrant, is the price of admission. Without that constant and controlled flow of immigrants, reshaped into Americans, this country cannot flourish.

I feel deeply for the Latinos who were led to believe that our borders meant little and that they did not have to undergo the anguish of assimilating into America. The events we see are the fault of those who lied to them by inviting them but not explaining that, though they will always remember their pasts, for now, they must undergo the pain that is the price of being American. Keep your memories, but live and value the nation you live in. As to those who invited them and lied to them about what they would face, you have been not kind but reckless and even sadistic. You should have known better since you, too, were immigrants or descended from them. You had no right to mislead this generation's immigrants as to who may enter and the price they will pay. Yours was a false kindness.

This does not excuse the treatment being dealt out to illegal immigrants, an immigration that was at most encouraged and at least ignored by prior administrations. But in reversing those policies, there should be awareness of the vast ambiguity of U.S. policy, and for the most part, treating them as criminals is uncalled for unless they were guilty of more than the crime of being here. There should be a deep element of kindness toward people who were led to believe that the door was wide open. On this, my heart is with the immigrants. I was allowed into the U.S. by the Truman administration. Even if the Eisenhower administration saw my admission as a mistake, I would hope that I would be treated as a victim of a mistake, not as a criminal. A mistaken policy should be answered with an element of kindness to those who are the victims of the mistake, among whom I do not include genuine criminals.

I was born a Hungarian, and America gave me a home and demanded that I become American. That included never forgetting who I was and never forgetting who I have become. My wife still cares deeply for England and Australia, I for Hungary. But we are bound together by the United States, its

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gifts and its demands.

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