

The Story You Can't Publish—But Can't Forget

BY ALINA TUGEND

Most of us, if we've been in this business long enough, have at least one story that for one reason or another isn't published, but continues to haunt us. This is mine.

I met Sandor Acs about 10 years ago. Sandor lived in the same apartment building in Manhattan as an old college friend of my husband's. We didn't have family in New York and Sandor, well, Sandor didn't have family, so we were part of a motley group invited over for Thanksgiving.

Sandor loved having a new audience to tell his stories and most of the Thanksgiving dinner was taken up with the Hungarian Revolution.

He was a Budapest photographer and only 23 in October 1956, when the Hungarians rose up against the Russians. He shot hundreds of photos, but his favorite was one of a giant rally at Parliament Square.

We were enthralled as, in his thick accent, he brought the scene to life. The crowd shouting, "Russians go home!" A statue of Stalin pulled off its pedestal. The street lights coming on, then instantly extinguished. Authorities had hoped that darkness would calm down and disperse the crowd, but someone set a newspaper ablaze, and in a moment, hundreds of thousands of such impromptu torches were illuminating the darkness.

He told us how he climbed on top of a truck and snapped a photo of the last peaceful moments of what would become—as historians have called it—one of the darkest periods of the Cold War.

As the Russian crackdown became increasingly brutal, he

got on a bicycle he had hurriedly bought and rode toward Austria with rolls of film stuffed in the frame of the bike. In the final few miles from the border, he crawled through mud.

Through a series of encounters, a Viennese photographer he had met at soccer games in Hungary ended up with some of Sandor's negatives. And when Sandor was unexpectedly quickly granted a visa to New York, he left with 120 negatives in his jacket pocket. But he didn't have his favorite, the one of the Parliament Square rally.

One day, while working at his job at a cookie factory in New Jersey, he got a call from *Life* magazine requesting permission to print his photo of the Parliament Square rally. The Austrian photographer delivered them to the magazine; it ran in the Feb. 18, 1957 issue of *Life*.

That money helped him buy a used Hasselblad, and Sandor started shooting weddings and babies. Eventually he moved to Manhattan, and in the 1960s became one of the main photographers for Lincoln Center.

That evening I met him, after the last of the pumpkin and pecan pie was cleared, he took my husband and me to his studio apartment packed with his photos—Jackie Kennedy, Imelda Marcos, Brigitte Bardot.

There was a lifetime of work in that tiny studio. He was 69 then, suffering from an old hip injury he got jumping from a tank during the revolution. He walked with a cane, his fingers were bent with arthritis and although he still did some good work, there were fewer and fewer jobs. He was going to have to sell his studio and move to New Jersey to save money. Divorced and childless, he was even thinking of going back to Budapest after all these years.

I didn't want this story to disappear into nothingness and the only way I knew how to stop that was to write it—but more importantly to have it published. I searched out possible

We can't rescue all the pieces that, for one reason or another, can't find a home. But those that we can't forget—those are worth saving, pulling out occasionally and sending off.



Robert F. Kennedy photo by Sandor Acs



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magazines and pitched an editor at Smithsonian magazine.

He was sort of interested—he was willing to look at the article, but didn't promise anything. So Sandor and I met for lunch at a Chinese restaurant and he talked and talked. I paid. He seemed grateful.

I turned the piece in and the editor asked me to rewrite it, but I was heartened that he also asked for some of Sandor's photos and sent out a photographer to shoot him.

Then he rejected the article. As is often the case, it baffled me, but even more it saddened me to have to tell Sandor, who was so excited at the possibility of receiving some late-in-life recognition.

Not long after, our mutual friend told us Sandor had died, I think, of cancer. A few months later, I received a call from the photo editor of the magazine I had pitched the story to, telling me they still had some photographs Sandor had given them to use with the article. The editor had sent it to his address, but they were returned. No one was there to claim them.

I told him Sandor had died and there was no family or estate I knew of. So I ended up with the photos.

I couldn't let the story go even after he died. I kept the notes and the FedEx envelope in a desk drawer.

Then a few months ago I was cleaning out the drawer and at the bottom, I came across the envelope with the six black-and-white 8 x 10 photos.

I pulled them out. There was Bobby Kennedy, emphatically making a point into a microphone. A sweaty Louis Armstrong holding his trombone and grinning widely. Former New York Philharmonic music director Kurt Masur half-smiling.

I decided to give Sandor's story another try and submitted it to a few *New York Times*' essay sections. Some nice feedback—"a beautiful story," one editor told me. But no takers.

I couldn't figure out where this interesting, quirky essay belonged. So, I put the envelope back in the drawer.

During our interview, Sandor told me that the photo that appeared in *Life* magazine—of the masses unified by a single purpose and illuminated by burning newspapers—still resonated with him half a century later.

"That was a magnificent moment," he said. "I witnessed it and then it was gone."

Maybe it was that quote that made me so reluctant to give up on Sandor's story. There are many people who have been a part of great historical moments and then live out the rest of their lives



Louis Armstrong photo by Sandor Acs

in obscurity. But this one crossed my path, and while saying I had a mission to publish it is too grandiose, I couldn't let it go.

We can't rescue all the pieces that, for one reason or another, can't find a home. But those that we can't forget—those are worth saving, pulling out occasionally and sending off. After all, we never know where they might land. ♦