

Herndon's Hungarian Connection

By Carol Bruce

Ferenc Nagy was an active member of the Herndon community and, in fact, is responsible for Herndon having the regional presence that it enjoys today.

The next time you're driving through the middle of Herndon, take a look at the big white house at the corner of Elden and School Streets. Now the home of former Herndon Town Council member Harlon Reece and his wife Midge, it was—for just over 30 years—the residence of Ferenc Nagy, the first freely elected prime minister of Hungary.

If you look closely you will see, just to the left of the front door, a bronze plaque that commemorates the former resident. The Herndon Historical Society, in cooperation with the Nagy Ferenc Foundation, presented the plaque to the Reeces in a ceremony that took place on April 26, 2008. Hungarian Ambassador Ferenc Somogyi and Nagy's twin daughters, Zsófia and Zsuzsa, were among those in attendance.

The son of peasant farmers, Nagy fought for peasant rights and democracy as the leader of Hungary's Smallholders Party. He became a member of parliament in 1939. He was active in the Hungarian resistance during World War II and as a result was imprisoned by the Germans. After the war—and following his release from prison—the Smallholders won Hungary's first free election and, in 1946, he became the country's prime minister.

Sixteen months later, while he was in Switzerland visiting one of his daughters at the University of Geneva, the Hungarian Communist Party staged a coup and seized control of the government. They also kidnapped his five-year-old son, Laszlo. In order to secure Laszlo's safe return, Nagy was forced to resign and go into exile. Invited by the U.S. government to come to the United States, he and his family arrived from Switzerland on June 14, 1947.

Nagy became a lecturer and writer. He documented his life and political career in *The Struggle behind the Iron Curtain*, which was published by MacMillan in 1948. Royalties from the best selling book helped him buy a farm on the outskirts of Herndon and the 12-room house on Elden Street.

He was an active member of the Herndon community and, in fact, is responsible for Herndon having the regional presence that it enjoys today. When the Dulles Airport Access Road—which opened along with the airport in 1962—was under construction, the Town petitioned the Federal Aviation Agency (FAA) for entrance and exit ramps. After the FAA rejected the request Nagy, who had met and worked with then-President Dwight D. Eisenhower during World War II, placed a call to the White House. He asked the president to intervene, which he did, and the FAA reversed its decision.

Ferenc Nagy passed away in June 1979. He is buried at Chestnut Grove Cemetery. Ten years after his death, the Historical Society presented a program entitled "Ferenc Nagy Remembered." As part of the program a plaque that features a bronze bas relief portrait

was unveiled. The plaque, which is on display in the Depot Museum, describes Nagy as “a warm, gentle man of highest personal honor, with a keen sense of humor, who never gave up his battle for freedom, especially for his beloved homeland.”