

Entrepreneur: Soviet tanks sent him westward

John Kardos' passion for stamps has taken him from communist Hungary to capitalist Bellevue, from a revolution once crushed under Soviet tanks to a place he can breathe free.

But, in a few months, that journey – but not the passion – will end. He'll close his shop, The Stamp Gallery, a victim of a new economic paradigm. The Eastside will gain more condominiums but lose a place where the consuming passion isn't money or technology, just pieces of paper about the size your thumbnail.

"You look at stamps, and you learn the world. It's a great hobby for kids," he says.

At least it was for him, back in Budapest, back in the bad old days. In a nation locked behind an iron curtain, 10-year-old John's imagination ranged over the globe. His vehicle: curiosity. His map: stamps.

By age 12, he was a budding entrepreneur in a place where entrepreneurs weren't welcome. In 1952, Budapest had but one stamp shop. The Communist Party controlled it, of course, and the party charged too much for too little.

At least that was the opinion of young John. So he went into competition – on the street corner in front of the store, short-stopping customers before they could enter the shop.

Business was good, until he made the mistake of selling to the wrong guy. Turns out his customer was the communist manager of the stamp shop. Monopolist vs. Entrepreneur. The cops came. The monopolist won.

Since that 1952 run-in, stamps have helped support John as he wandered through four different countries. First in his native land, then in West Germany, Sweden and in the United States, he's collected and dealt in stamps as part of the modern-day diaspora of Hungarians fleeing Hungary.

Always a stiff-necked bunch, Hungarians never pulled well under the Soviet yoke. A combustible mixture of resistance, pride, frustration and anger boiled up in 1956. John was in high school. Students were leading the insurrection.

After it was over, after Soviet tanks rolled into Budapest, school started again. In his class of about 30 students, a third had been killed, a third had escaped to the West, and only a third were left.

John was still there, still in class and still alive because his mother had kept him home for a week, locked in a closet without a window.

Later he trained as an electrical engineer.

"There was no way to make a good life in Hungary. My first dream was to own my own stamp shop. The communists wouldn't allow that, of course. My second dream was to own a car."

There weren't many cars in Hungary. There were in West Germany. John took a month "vacation" and went as a tourist to Frankfurt, where he got a job and worked his hands bloody – literally – tearing down brick walls in an old building destined to be remodeled. But his major source of funds came through smuggling.

"I knew what the market was for certain stamps in Germany. I knew I couldn't get anything like it in Hungary. The solution was simple."

At that time, Hungary had some huge postage stamps, perhaps the size of a business card. John's accomplice would use one of the large postage stamp to mail a

letter each day to John in Frankfurt. The deal was, the accomplice licked only the edges of the large stamp. Beneath its un-gummed center was hidden several very expensive stamps, which John would retrieve and sell.

But a used \$100 Ford (for which he was forced to pay \$2,000 in customs duties) and occasional black market stamp transactions didn't fit into John's life plan. So, he took another vacation – one that lasted most of a lifetime. He dared not tell anyone in Hungary, not even his mother, that his was a one-way trip.

In Germany again, a free man, but a man without money, with only a few rare stamps to his name. And the West German government thought the best place for him was in a refugee camp.

“I guess they wanted to make sure I wasn't a communist spy.”

Sweden offered a better life, plus six months of classroom instruction in Swedish. There, he met another language student, over from the state of Washington on a Rotary International scholarship to learn the language of her grandfather and to take education courses at the University of Gothenborg. She was destined to become Joyce Kardos.

A year and a half later, John was met by his fiancée at Sea-Tac. While he was fluent in Hungarian, German and Swedish, he hadn't gotten far in English. For more than a year, he and Joyce spoke Swedish, their only common language, at home.

John took the economic steps familiar to many immigrants to the United States: He worked in small-time manufacturing, grinding steel fittings for a water-ski maker, and then became a janitor.

“I said, ‘Honey, I didn't come to America to become a janitor.’ She said, ‘Tell me what you want to do.’”

Own a stamp shop, of course.

Joyce, who would put in 30 years as a teacher in the Bellevue School District, mostly at Spiritridge Elementary School, was bringing home \$420 a month in 1972. After rent for the new stamp shop, rent for an apartment and other expenses, they had \$150 a month for the rest, including food.

“Once a month, we'd go to McDonalds for a hamburger. That was our big treat.”

It was a struggle at first, but John knew his stamps. After a few months, the shop started to pay. He's been at the same location, 10335 Main Street, for 33 years.

But condos are coming. The date isn't yet certain. The shop's fate is.

After the wrecking ball, John will run a little mail order out of his house.

The world, interpreted in pointillist exuberance of thousands of colorful pieces of paper, will be there. But the door won't open again, pushed by a young boy ready to discover the world – one piece of paper at a time.