



Tear  
down  
this  
wall!

Hungarian politician Miklós Németh played a crucial role in the fall of the Iron Curtain: With his consent, the border towards Austria was opened, paving the way for East German refugees to flee to West Germany

An interview by Anna Frenyó

Zarris

**THE ATLANTIC TIMES:** During the Pan-European Picnic on Aug. 19, 1989, you permitted the border between Hungary and Austria to be opened for three hours, allowing more than 600 East German refugees to escape towards the West. How did you know that Moscow would not react with force?

**MIKLÓS NÉMETH:** The Pan-European Picnic and the mass exodus of the East German citizens through Hungary was the final test of Soviet tolerance, which I had already begun probing in March 1989 when I visited Mikhail Gorbachev. We talked about several important subjects, such as nuclear weapons being deployed in Hungary, the withdrawal of Soviet troops, the introduction of a multiparty system, dismantling the Iron Curtain and Hungary's foreign policy opening up towards countries such as the Vatican, Chile, South Korea and Israel.

So you asked for Gorbachev's permission to dismantle the Iron Curtain?

I didn't ask for his permission, I informed him that we were going to use other methods to protect the border. The Budapest-Vienna World Trade Fair was in preparation at that time, so I told him "Mikhail, imagine the Japanese tourists arriving in Vienna and going to the border to take photos of this ugliness."

And he accepted it?

It was a package deal. He made me promise that I wouldn't talk about pulling the Soviet troops out of Hungary, nor about the existence of nuclear weapons in Hungary aimed at northern Italy. The Eastern European countries claimed to not have nuclear weapons and I was shocked to find out the contrary when I became prime minister. Gorbachev said: "Do not make my situation even harder at the disarmament negotiations in Geneva and Vienna."

Did this reassure you that tearing the Iron Curtain in Hungary would not result in an armed Soviet response?

It was part of a long process. Here was Gorbachev giving me his word, it was a question of mutual trust. I asked Gorbachev