

to pull out at least a few troops by the summer – as a symbolic act of benevolence.

**Was Gorbachev's benevolence enough to enable Hungary's revolutionary politics?**

With a leader like Brezhnev or Andropov it would have been impossible. We were anxious to know whether Gorbachev would stay in position. We were supporting his reforms. We took a risk upon ourselves by seizing the opportunity this historic constellation in time was offering us.

**Which were the decisions you took after meeting Gorbachev in March that led up to the Pan-European Picnic and opening the border in August 1989?**

Coming back from Moscow, we started pulling down a 3.5 km (2.2 miles) long section of the barbed wire at Rajka. This was before any official decision had been taken by the government – I considered it a first test, as our operation was watched by the Czechoslovaks, the Austrians and by the commander of the lieutenant of the North-Transdanubian Soviet Military Base. No phone call came from Moscow to enquire about what we were doing. In May we broke the news to around 100 journalists, including Joachim Jauer of the German TV network ZDF, that we were planning to dismantle the border controls and the government's official decision was published by the government-friendly daily paper, Magyar Hirlap. Moscow did not say a word.

**Did anyone else complain?**

Heinz Kessler, Erich Honecker's minister of defense flew to Budapest to inquire of my minister of defense what was going on, but we simply replied we would find other ways to protect the frontier. Nevertheless, we knew that without Moscow, neither Honecker nor Ceausescu, who had also expressed his discontent, could do anything to us. It was Moscow whose reactions we were testing: how far could we go without any bloodshed?

**How did you react when you heard about the idea of the Pan-European Picnic?**

I learned about the plan from my minister of state, Imre Pozsgay, who was supposed to host an international picnic of peace with Otto Habsburg, organized by the Hungarian oppositional parties to be held at the Austrian

frontier on Aug. 19. For that they would open the border for a few hours. I thought it was a brilliant idea. One week before the event was due, I held a flyer in my hand, which explained in German how one could get to the picnic site in Sopronpuszta. I believe it was the West German Secret Service that placed these flyers in the camps full of East German tourists.

**Many former East German refugees who managed to cross the border during the Pan-European Picnic say they trusted the Hungarian soldiers would not use weapons. Some say if something like this had happened in the German Democratic Republic, the armed border patrol's reaction would have been fatal. Which preparatory measures did you take when you learned about the possible mass exodus of East German citizens?**

I told the police superintendent that I did not wish to see any armed patrols along the border that day; they should stay in their barracks. I also told him that if some East German citizens wished to cross the border, he should not prevent them from doing so, and that I would not mind if the event were photographed and reported on. My actual aim was to solve the situation with the GDR refugees in the country. Hungary was too small a country to host them, but I would by no means send them back home forcefully. Thus, the only solution was to let them leave the country through the Western border. When the pictures of the Pan-European Picnic were published in the press and Moscow still remained silent I knew: this had been the last test before we were ready to officially open the border towards Austria.

**Why are you not politically active anymore?**

1989 was an important year in world history and I was allowed to lead this country from a dictatorship to a multiparty-system without any blood being shed. If life gives somebody the chance to accomplish something similar, he would think twice before entering politics again. My mission was completed in 1989. ■

*Miklós Nemeth was Hungary's last communist prime minister – and also the first post-communist one. He was in office from 1988 to 1990.*