Two refugees from the 1956 Hungarian Revolution found their way to Kent State years ago. Their recent visit to the Kent Campus brought back old memories—and made some new ones.

On the first day of Spring Quarter 1959, Brigitta Strammer arrived on the Kent Campus with one small suitcase. She had taken a bus from Cleveland, where her family had lived since they fled Hungary in late 1956, when Soviet forces had invaded to crush a countrywide protest against domestic policies imposed by the USSR. (About 200,000 Hungarians sought political refuge abroad, with about 30,000 settling in the United States.) Strammer had a $700 scholarship from Forest City Realty Trust. One of her cousins attended Kent State, so she was looking forward to a residential college experience, too. A student she met on the bus took her to what was then known as the Center for International Students, on the ground floor of Lowry Hall. And that’s when she met the young man who would become her husband.

Stephen Hanzély had arrived on the Kent Campus in Fall Quarter 1958 with one large suitcase. He had taken a train from Colorado, where he and his mother and brother had settled after escaping Hungary in late 1956. (His father died in a Soviet POW camp toward the end of WWII.) The family had reunited with his older half-brother, a teacher in Fort Morgan, Colorado. After he graduated from high school in Colorado, Hanzély received a $500 grant from the World University Service (especially intended for Hungarian refugees who came to the United States) and his brother somehow secured in-state tuition and a scholarship that covered all his first-year expenses at Kent State.

On that spring day in 1959, Hanzély returned from spring break and stopped by the Center for International Students hoping to see some familiar faces and visit with W. Leslie Garnett, PhD, who taught English, coordinated international student programs, and was an advisor and mentor to international students. As he came through the door, he noticed a blonde girl sitting with her back to him, but didn’t pay much attention. “I walked into Dr. Garnett’s office and said hi to her as I usually did,” Hanzély recalls. “Then she came out of the office with me and said to a mutual friend, ‘Well, aren’t you going to introduce them? They’re both from Hungary.’ So I said in Hungarian, ‘Oh, really?’ Brigitta replied in Hungarian, ‘Yes!’ And then how it all started.”

Although Hanzély felt awkward around girls, “Brigitta got my heart thumping, so I resolved to come out of my shell and compete with the other guys for her attention,” he says. He showed her around campus, took her to movies and for pizza in downtown Kent and soon they were an “item.” At the time, about 100 international students from about 30 countries were studying at the Kent Campus. They formed an organization that later became known as The Kent Internationals, with Garnett as their advisor.

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Brigitta and Stephen Hanzély

As the quarter neared its end, the group partnered with the auxiliary board of Akron’s International Institute to inaugurate Charter Embassy Ball at Kent State, featuring flags, native costumes and music from many nations. The highlight of the evening was the crowning of the king and queen, who just happened to be two students from Hungary—Hanzély and Strammer.

“Our was a budding romance, although I was too chicken to kiss her until well into our sophomore year,” Hanzély says. They hung out whenever they could and studied together in the library. One year, Strammer lived in Prentice Hall and Hanzély lived across the street in Dunbar, a dorm for women that was pressed into use to accommodate an overflow of male students.

A few months earlier, the couple graduated with bachelor’s degrees in 1962—his in physics and hers in German—they married on August 25, 1962, in Cleveland. They moved to Toledo, Ohio, where he earned a master’s degree from the University of Toledo in 1964. She worked as a secretary at the university before taking time off to raise their first daughter, Melinda. Next, they moved to New Mexico, where he earned a PhD from New Mexico State University in 1969 and their second daughter, Erika, was born.

Returning to Ohio, Hanzély joined the faculty at Youngstown State University as an assistant professor in the Department of Physics and Astronomy in 1968. He was promoted to associate professor in 1973 and full professor in 1980. He served as department chair from 1974 to 1979 and became the first director of Faculty Relations in 1993. Returning to Hungary in 1994 as a Fulbright scholar, he taught one semester at the University of Pannonia in Veszprém.

After raising their children, Brigitta Hanzély re-entered the job market as a substitute teacher in Boardman, Ohio. She then worked full time at the YSU library, where she was responsible for ordering foreign language books and materials and also earned a master’s degree in education. Both Hanzély retired from Youngstown State in 2002, with Stephen Hanzély receiving the title Professor Emeritus. In 2016, YSU honored him with its prestigious Heritage Award.

In 2011, the Hanzélys established the Dr. W. Leslie Garnett International Student Scholarship to support international students attending Kent State University.

“She was a tiny, soft-spoken but tough-as-nails English professor who taught and mentored international students and looked out for our interests,” Hanzély says of Garnett. “She made the International Center Student our ‘home away from home’—a place where we could congregate and learn about other cultures.”

Brigitta Hanzély adds, “She really was influential and helped the international students solve any problems that occurred.”

Having both received scholarships as international students, the Hanzélys are happy to pay it forward. They have also established scholarships at Youngstown State and New Mexico State. “It’s an investment in the future,” Brigitta Hanzély says. “And we can’t think of a better investment than one in the next generation.”

Speaking of the next generation, this September the Hanzélys returned to the Kent Campus for Parents and Families Weekend with their daughter Melinda Winsen, MA ’94, who has a master’s degree in speech pathology from Kent State, and her family. Winsen’s daughter, Jessica, a first-year student in the College of Education, Health and Human Services, is living in Fletcher Hall, majoring in speech pathology and planning to enter the same field as her mother.

Although the campus has grown in the 63 years since Stephen and Brigitta Hanzély first walked its paths, they were able to show their granddaughter the spot between Prentice and Dunbar halls where they posed for a photo in spring 1961—and to re-create that pose for this magazine story (see above). When asked what it was like to be on the Kent Campus again, this time with their granddaughter, the Hanzélys smile. “The third generation,” marvels Stephen Hanzély. “Who would have thought when we were here, that one day our granddaughter would be a student at Kent State!”

Above: The Hanzélys visit the Kent Campus with family on Parents and Families Weekend 2022. Left to right: George Winsen; Jessica Winsen (first-year student at Kent State University); Stephen Hanzély, BS '69, Brigitta Hanzély, BS '70; Nicholas Winsen (Sophomore at Youngstown State University); and Melinda (Hanzély) Winsen, MA '94.