THE HUNGARIAN CONNECTION...

chef Louis Szathmary

On Life

. . . determining that Bell's application had been filed earlier in the day, they granted him a patent.

This was the first working telephone. But it needed a direct wire from every customer who had a phone to every subscriber with whom he wanted to talk. In other words, if Mr. A wanted to talk to Mr. B, there had to be a wire from his home to B's Home. If he wanted to talk to Mr. C and Mr. D, those connecting wires were needed. The system, by today's standards, was awkward and cumbersome. But it was new and intriguing and people who could afford it bought phones.

Edison was highly interested in this new "miracle." He put a tremendous amount of effort, ingenuity and money into patents to improve the quality of the electrically-transmitted human voice, and with good reason. He was hard of hearing, a lip reader, which wasn't easy at a time when most men had large mustaches covering their lips.

Among Edison's many "imported" associate engineers from Europe was a Hungarian maverick, a genius tinkerer named Tivadar Puskas. According to a story told by Edison to reporters and biographers, Puskas had the idea to direct the wires from the telephone subscribers not to each other, but to a central location in each city, from where, after calling, you could be connected with any other phone subscriber in that community.

The idea worked. The first telephone local switchboard center was born. That's how the toy of the wealthy became a method of fast communication for the masses.

Edison must have been very much impressed with Puskas' talent, because he made him his European representative when he tried to persuade the large cities in the Old World to switch from gaslight to electricity.

Puskas, and later, another Hungarian Istvan Fodor, were responsible for changing the quaint gaslights on the streets of Paris, Brussels, Antwerp, Vienna, St. Petersburg, and Rome into gleaming electric lights.

After a while, Puskas resigned and spent the rest of his short life working on yet another means of mass communication, aviation. He worked with dirigibles, the lighter-than-air rigid balloons that became known as zeppelins.

As, during our recent telephone crisis, we kept hearing and reading about the telephone company's difficulties with its huge switchboard operation in Hinsdale, I kept thinking of the Hungarian who was so instrumental in designing the telephone switching system.

A friend who knows that I am keenly interested in things Hungarian had sent me during the phone crisis a clipping from *Linn's Stamp News*.

The clipping, from the May 9 issue, is of an article headlined "Schwarz, not Zeppelin, invented rigid airship." The well-documented and illustrated article is about a recently published book, *The Orient Flight of LZ127—Graf Zeppelin*, written by Fred F. Blau, co-author of the book. He explains that he recently found at the Jewish National & University Library at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, the original contract, indicating Graf Ferdinand von Zeppelin had purchased for large sums of money numerous patents and non-patented inventions from the widow of a David Schwarz, who was born in Keszthely in Hungary in 1845, and who had invented, patented and built an airship long before Graf Zeppelin, but had died on the day of the maiden voyage of his dirigible.

As I read the clipping, I recalled that Puskas, the inventor of the telephone switchboard, had also worked, after he left Edison, on the dirigible aircraft. And I am wondering if I will be able to find some connection between the two Hungarians. If I find out, I will let you know. Right now, I have to run. My phone is ringing. Could it be Aurora?

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is reprinted from the June 15th issue of "Inside Lincoln Park", a weekly for which "Chef Louie" writes a full page of recipes under the title of "Table Talk" and feature articles under the title of "On Life".