On this day: 27 June - the Iron Curtain was breached

The first breach of the Iron Curtain which divided Communist Central and Eastern Europe from the West for over decades took place 20 years ago today. Just outside the Hungarian town of Sopron, Austrian Foreign Minister Alois Mock joined his Hungarian counterpart Gyula Horn in cutting the fence on 27 June 1989. It led to a stream of people heading west and climaxed in the fall of the Berlin Wall in November that year. On this day MEPs from both countries share their thoughts and memories.

The physical barrier that divided Europe was originally installed to stop the tide of people fleeing Soviet rule in the east. An estimated 15 million people headed west in the five years after 1945.

The phrase "Iron Curtain" was coined by Winston Churchill in his famous speech at Fulton, Missouri in 1946. Standing next to US President Harry Truman he said: "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an 'iron curtain' has descended across the Continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe - Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia."

"The power of freedom knows no borders"

József Szájer is a Hungarian Member of the European Parliament originally from Sopron. In the 1980's he was a pro-democracy activist. He told us that he first crossed over the border when he was 20 years old.

He told us that "those who breached the border at Sopronpuszta 20 years ago accomplished one of the most outstanding historic events of the 20th century. The Pan-European picnic (a peace demonstration) reminds us of the fact that the power of freedom knows no borders".

Mr Szájer also spoke of the need for people from the west to remember what the division of Europe was like: "I handed over a piece of the Iron Curtain to EP President Hans-Gert Pöttering and Commission President José Manuel Barroso. I gave it to European politicians whose countries have been living in freedom for a longer time than ours so as to remind them every day that even the most oppressive regimes can be overthrown."

"It was like in 1956"

Outgoing Austrian MEP Christa Prets was someone who remembers those events well. From 1987 to 1999, she was Mayor and Councillor in Burgenland, the Austrian State that borders Hungary. She told us: "There was a fascination. It was the same like in 1956 when the Hungarians were coming, and wanted to be free. It was a historical moment for the whole region."

"We especially in the border region had many advantages from the opening of the border. Today, if you need some documents related to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, then you need to go to the archive of Sopron, that was the biggest city in Burgenland at a time, a thing which you could not do before without waiting for hours at the Iron Curtain" she said.

June 1989: "left me and my friends quite stunned"
Gisela Kallenbach was a German civil rights activist and an MEP between 2004 and 2009. Growing up in East Germany she was not allowed to take her school "Abitur" exam due to her social background and her Christian denomination.

She told us of her reaction: "What happened in June 1989 at the Austrian-Hungarian border left me and my friends quite stunned. Why? Firstly because none of us had imagined that we would see the iron curtain disappear in our life times. And secondly because we had to fear that now an even greater number of our friends, family members and colleagues would leave for the Golden West."

She went on: "I was one of those who in autumn 1989 were shouting 'we are staying' in response to the rallying cry 'we want to get out'. In the end, cutting the border fence was an important step on the path towards a free democracy and a united Germany. Therefore one needs to thank the Hungarian government of the time for its courage."