

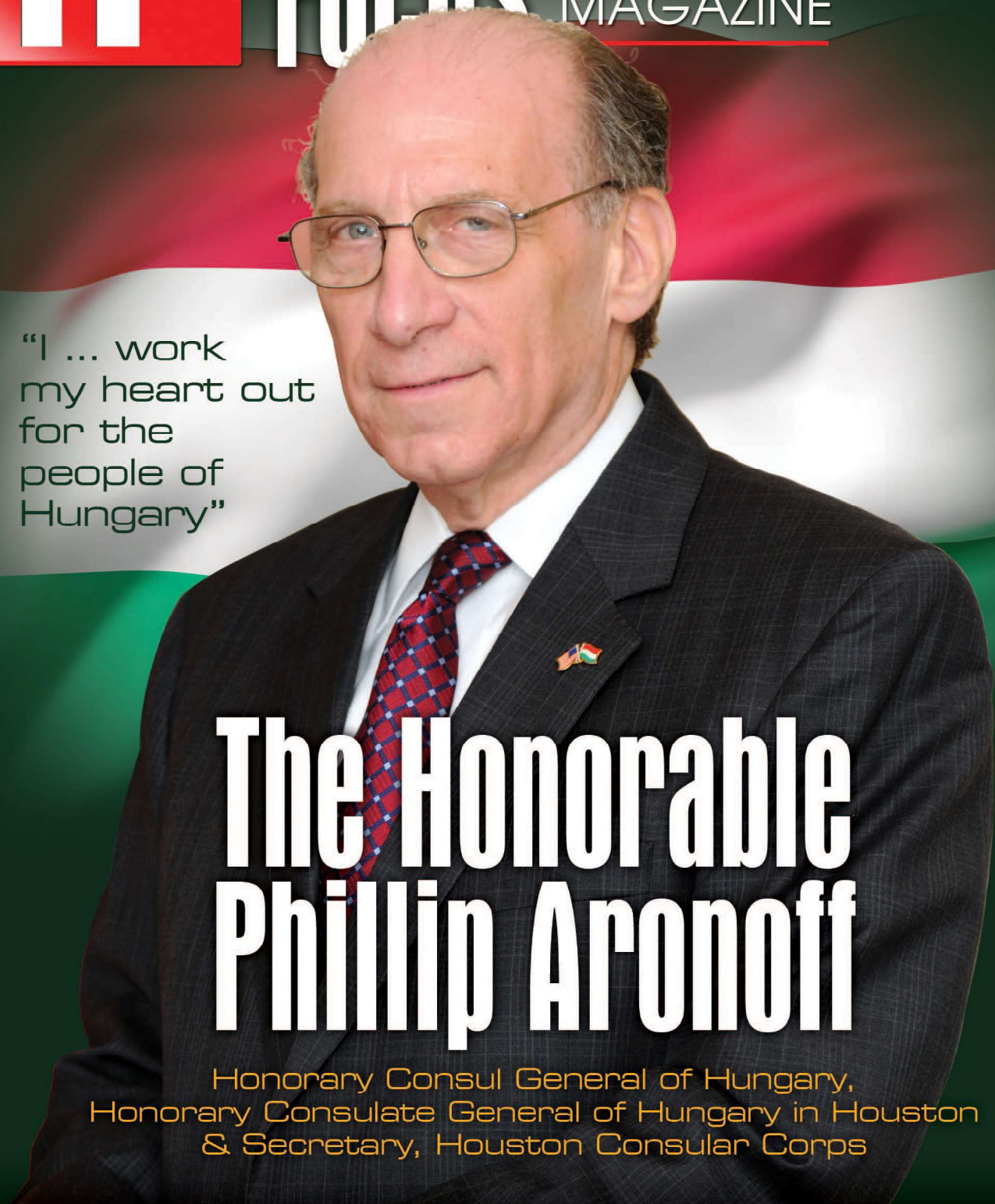


# INTERNATIONAL FOCUS

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## MAGAZINE

"I ... work  
my heart out  
for the  
people of  
Hungary"

A portrait of Phillip Aronoff, an older man with glasses, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and a red and blue patterned tie. He has a small Hungarian flag pin on his lapel. The background is a blurred Hungarian flag.

# The Honorable Phillip Aronoff

Honorary Consul General of Hungary,  
Honorary Consulate General of Hungary in Houston  
& Secretary, Houston Consular Corps

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# The Honorable Phillip Aronoff

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BY KATIA HADJIYSKA

IF MAGAZINE CONTRIBUTING REPORTER / ENCOURAGE GROUP CEO

**Katia:** *First, tell us a little about yourself and walk us through your background.*

**Mr. Aronoff:** I grew up in Houston, Texas. After the war, my father was transferred here and fortunately brought his children with him. I went to school here, including graduating from the University of Houston. I then went to work in the scrap iron and steel family business, supplying scrap iron to Mexico. I stayed in that business until Mexico faced a severe crisis in 1994, and then I found an opportunity in the granite business. I have been in the granite kitchen countertop business since then.

In 2004, I met the Hungarian Ambassador to the United States through

a mutual friend of mine, Tom Neumann. Tom was born in Transylvania, part of Romania, which before WWI was part of Hungary, so he was ethnically Hungarian although he was born in Romania. My predecessor retired and the Ambassador asked my friend to introduce him to somebody here in Houston and he connected us. They asked me to serve and Honorary Consul but I declined. I said, "I am not a diplomat, I am a granite salesman." About three months later Hungary sent 300 soldiers to Iraq to fight alongside our young men. This was in 2004. I called the Ambassador back and I said, "If you haven't found anyone, I would like to accept your offer now to work my heart out for the people of Hungary, as a way of expressing my appreciation as an

American patriot, for Hungary putting their young men in harm's way alongside our men." He was excited and gave me the honor to represent the people of Hungary here in Texas.

**Katia:** *What does a Consul General in your capacity do?*

**Mr. Aronoff:** I am an Honorary Consul General. Honorary Consuls have the same accreditation from the U.S. Department of State and from the Foreign Ministry in our home country as career Consuls. I have the same identification as other Consul Generals who are Foreign Service employees and who are here on diplomatic passports. The concept of a Honorary Consul was set up years ago when the original treaties for



diplomatic relationships were being established. Because of the great expense and distance to travel, many countries could not afford to have representation in other countries. The concept of finding a local citizen of some presumed prominence and asking them to represent the other country with full diplomatic accreditation was originated. I do not have full diplomatic immunity like career Consul Generals do, except when I am acting in my official capacity, but rather, I have limited diplomatic immunity. They cannot declare me a *persona non grata* and remove me from the country because I am a U.S. citizen.

What I do is represent the people of Hungary, set up meetings for foreign dignitaries that come here, and work to establish business contacts between the two countries bilaterally. Hungary's Honorary Consuls, in fact most Honorary Consuls, do not do documents. For example, if someone needs a visa to go to Hungary, I do not do that, but I facilitate and send them in the right direction. According to the Geneva treaties that set up diplomatic relations, there are several specific responsibilities. By law I am required to be notified if there is a Hungarian citizen being held in jail, arrested, or being detained by government authorities. I have the legal obligation to confirm that they are well treated and that they have appropriate representation. Also, if there is a ship with the flag of that country in the port, in my territory, I am responsible to make sure that if there are any problems they get resolved. Hungary is landlocked, so I wouldn't have that particular issue, but these are the types of matters that a Honorary Consul and a career Consul deal with.



**Katia:** *Tell us about the Honorary Consulate General of Hungary in Houston. What parts of America are covered by the Consulate and what are the services it provides?*

**Mr. Aronoff:** Just Texas. I was offered more, but Texas is a large territory to cover. I get no reimbursement of expenses, of anything to do this job. I do this strictly for both the satisfaction of helping people who need help and of interacting with my colleagues, who not only follow what is going on around the world, but who are also active participants.

**Katia:** *What are some past, present, and future goals for Hungary's relationship with Houston?*

**Mr. Aronoff:** Three month ago we had the Foreign Minister in Dallas. We have signed collaboration agreements with the Ministry of Health, MD Anderson, collaboration agreements with Texas A&M and the Agriculture Ministry. We've had the Finance Minister visit Texas to develop business through what they refer to as "road shows." We travel around with Hungarian officials showing how and why one should do busi-

ness in Hungary. It is these types of relationships and goals that we work to establish.

**Katia:** *What are some big picture issues facing Hungary today?*

**Mr. Aronoff:** The biggest issue facing Hungary today is unwanted immigration. Recently, the Prime Minister called for a referendum to vote on whether or not the people of Hungary want to let in all of the refugees that the European Union is telling them that they have to let in. The European Union is apportioning amongst all E.U. member countries a certain quota of refugees from the Middle East. Hungary is resisting letting them in en masse. The Prime Minister has received a tremendous amount of criticism for keeping the refugees out and building fences. At one point I was getting e-mails from people saying, "Shame on Hungary. How can you do this, and not let these people in!" I responded with Hungary's position and said, "Why are you mad at us? Be mad at Assad — he is the one who's destroying lives, we're not."

**Katia:** *Hungary is currently trying to build foreign investment and job opportunities inside the country. Tell us about them and any offered incentives if any.*

**Mr. Aronoff:** They have a lot, for example the new tax abatements. Hungary's income tax rate, corporate income tax rate, and personal income tax rates are some of the lowest in the European Union. We are talking 16% personal income tax. The government has hired people who will work with anyone serious about doing business in Hungary. They have people who will walk you through all

of the different phases that you have to go through in order to get permits and get facilities up and operational.

**Katia:** *How is the Hungarian business community uniquely positioning itself to help Americans who are interested in doing business in Hungary?*

**Mr. Aronoff:** It is mostly the government that is facilitating these efforts. In the business community, there is an American-Hungarian

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Chamber of Commerce and they are very involved, very active. It is made up of Hungarian companies that do business with the United States, and mostly with American companies doing business in Hungary. It is very effective and important.

The Foreign Minister, the Finance Minister, and the Commerce Minister were here. People from the American-Hungarian Chamber of Commerce accompanied them on the trip aimed at developing business. The Chamber is very responsive, pri-

vate, and funded by payments from the member organizations.

**Katia:** *Is there anything we have not talked about that you would like to discuss?*

**Mr. Aronoff:** I would like to share some history of Hungary. A lot of territory after WWI was taken away from Hungary. At the beginning of WWII, Hitler came in and promised that he will give Hungary back the land it lost in WWI, and therefore the country joined on the side of the Axis. Thank God they lost the war. Hungary, like many other countries, suffered under the hammer of communism for the next 45 years.

One of the things I am trying to do this year, as it is the 60th anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, is to create events to commemorate the Revolution and remember those who lost their lives fighting for freedom from communism. It was the first time that the people living under communism stood up and said, "Wait a minute, communism is evil; we have no freedom; our lives are horrible." Before that, the world's media was out there propagandizing what a wonderful, benevolent leader Joseph Stalin was and how everybody was so happy and equal, while 6 million people are dying from starvation in Ukraine. 45 years later, when George Bush was President and Jim Baker was Secretary of State, communism was defeated and nobody died; it was handled so beautifully. The commemoration will express the appreciation to George Bush and Jim Baker for leading a truly bloodless revolution which freed Hungary and the rest of Eastern Europe from communism.