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OBITUARIES

Hungarian Immigrant Thrived as Early Investor in Napa Vineyards

Nicholas Molnar, who has died at age 94, tagged along with Olympic athletes on a luxury tour of America—then had to find a way to earn a living



Nicholas Molnar, an immigrant from Hungary, settled in San Francisco and later invested in California vineyards.

PHOTO: MOLNAR FAMILY

By [James R. Hagerty](#)

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Nicholas Molnar's life in the U.S. began with a luxurious tour of his new country.

His wife at the time, Andrea Bodo, an Olympic gold-medal winner in gymnastics, was among dozens of Hungarian athletes who defected after the Soviet Union crushed their nation's revolt in 1956.

Sports Illustrated invited the Hungarian athletes to the U.S. for a tour with stops at top hotels in New York, San Francisco and other cities. Though he wasn't an athlete, Mr. Molnar was along for the ride. During a visit in Miami, he gaped at the skyline and flashy automobiles. "I wonder if you people realize how wonderful this all is," he asked a local reporter.

Then he settled in San Francisco and wondered how to make a living. Mr. Molnar, a former political prisoner, had been a sportswriter in Hungary. His English was shaky, however, and his knowledge of baseball negligible.

The 30-year-old refugee was forced to find a new career. Eventually, he proved surprisingly good at selling life insurance, then moved on to helping small firms set up pension plans. One of the contacts he made, Robert Mondavi, gave him a tip in the late 1960s: Napa Valley was destined to become a major wine-producing area.

Mr. Molnar began buying land and establishing vineyards. He advertised in *The Wall Street Journal* to find investors to join him. One of his best purchases was a 100-acre plot acquired in 1973 near San Pablo Bay. At the time, the area was considered too cool and foggy for viticulture. But it proved an excellent place to grow Pinot Noir and Chardonnay grapes and is now part of the Carneros wine region.

He later diversified by pioneering wild rice production in Hungary and exporting Hungarian oak barrels to winemakers around the world.

Mr. Molnar died Jan. 11 at his home in Piedmont, Calif. He was 94.

Miklós Dénes Molnár, later known as Nicholas, was born March 30, 1927, and grew up in Budapest. His father, trained as a lawyer, ran a trucking company.

World War II brought privations and then chaos in 1944 and 1945 as Russian and German forces fought for control of Hungary. Russian troops pressed Mr. Molnar and others into service loading train cars. At one point, German fighter planes strafed the rail yard where he was working. "I do not know how and why did I survive," he wrote later.

When the family returned to Budapest as the Nazi regime collapsed in May 1945, they found four families occupying their apartment and so had to squeeze into a single room, whose ceiling had collapsed.

Mr. Molnar and his father revived the family trucking business and thrived by transporting food, tobacco and wine. As the Communists gradually tightened their control of the government, however, prospects for entrepreneurs dimmed. In the late 1940s, according to Mr. Molnar's unpublished memoir, the secret police raided his father's apartment and office, charged him with seeking to destroy the socialist order and sent him to a prison camp.

The younger Mr. Molnar was kicked out of his university and later imprisoned, initially in a cold building, infested with bed bugs, where inmates barely subsisted on stale bread and cabbage soup. Both men eventually were released, but the younger Mr. Molnar remained subject to curfews and was required to visit police minders weekly.

He began writing for various publications, often about sailing, skiing and other sports. In 1953, he met Ms. Bodo during a visit to Lake Balaton. They married the next year.

She was in Australia with her Olympic teammates when the 1956 rebellion erupted. Mr. Molnar was in the thick of fighting between Hungarians and Soviet troops. At one point, pursued by a tank, he escaped by running through a tunnel. When it became clear in November 1956 that the revolt had failed, he found his way through ankle-deep mud in a forest into Austria. From there, he flew to Australia to rejoin his wife.

He earned an economics degree at the University of California, Berkeley, while doing menial newspaper jobs. Then a Russian immigrant hired him as a salesman for Pacific Mutual Life Insurance Co. “I fled Hungary because of the Russians, and now the opportunity I was looking for was handed to me by a Russian,” he wrote later.

Though he became a star salesman of life insurance, Mr. Molnar wrote, “I didn’t enjoy to try to convince people to buy something they didn’t want in the first place.”

His eventual success in the wine business allowed him to consider ways to contribute to revitalizing the Hungarian economy in the late 1980s. Hungary didn’t need winemaking expertise, so he sought another idea—and found it in a newspaper article about wild rice.

He formed a joint venture and opened a wild rice processing plant in Kisújszállás, Hungary, in 1991. His family retains a controlling stake in that business, Indián Rizs Ltd. The family also has a stake in Kádár Hungary, a maker of wine barrels.

His sons, Peter and Arpad Molnar, run Obsidian Wine Co. in Sonoma, Calif., which makes wines from grapes grown at the family’s vineyards.

Mr. Molnar is survived by his second wife, Catherine Molnar, along with his two sons, a daughter, Aniko Molnar, and six grandchildren. The family plans to hold a memorial service for him in March in Napa Valley and another one later this year in Szigetvár, Hungary, at a chapel built by his great-great grandfather.

Write to James R. Hagerty at bob.hagerty@wsj.com