

THE FORGOTTEN GENERATION: CANADA'S HUNGARIAN REFUGEES OF 1956

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Suite à la révolution hongroise de 1956, environ 37,000 réfugiés furent accueillis par le Canada. Les nouveaux arrivants purent semble-t-il bénéficier, à l'encontre des vagues précédentes d'immigrants, de conditions ayant facilité leur adaptation. De plus, à ces conditions s'ajoute le fait que la plupart étaient jeunes, bien éduqués et/ou possédant des qualifications techniques. En comparaison des vagues successives d'immigrants qui firent du Canada leur pays d'adoption, peu d'études ont été complétées sur les réfugiés Hongrois de 1956. Cette communication examine donc, par le biais des témoignages oraux, quelques unes des causes de cette carence. Et qui plus est, on y démontre le fait que, contrairement à ce que l'on croit, les réfugiés hongrois de 1956 connurent les mêmes difficultés d'adaptation communes aux immigrants de diverses origines. En réalité, les problèmes auxquels les Hongrois furent confrontés en 1956 furent plus sérieux à cause du changement brusque et draconien provoqué par leur déplacement. Bien que des études statistiques furent complétées sur cette vague, aucune analyse sérieuse de leurs impressions, opinions et attitudes n'a été réalisée. Cette communication comble en partie ce vide en présentant une telle analyse basée sur des témoignages oraux.

Following the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, Canada accepted some 37,000 Hungarian refugees. These newcomers were unique for several reasons: the majority were young; according to one source, "over 75 percent were under the age of 35".¹ They were assessed by J.W. Pickersgill, the Canadian Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, as an "Immigration Minister's dream come true", because in his opinion they represented the brightest and best of the urban population of Hungary.² There was tremendous public support and assistance in their resettlement in Canada. Immigration procedures were minimized and according to one newspaper report, the refugees' applications were being processed "one-a-minute".³

Generally, the Hungarian refugees had a considerable impact upon the host society: they were in the headlines of most major newspapers for months and they were resettled in all parts of Canada. Media coverage of the event was massive from the end of October 1956 to March 1957. It is the contention of this paper that this media attention created some stereotypes and distorted impressions of the Hungarian refugees, such as: the majority took part in the fighting during the Revolution, they had it easy because of initial government assistance and support, that many criminals slipped into Canada with the refugees, that the refugees on the whole were demanding and unwilling to work hard to achieve success.

This paper intends to examine some of the published sources concerning the refugee situation in Canada and compare them to the oral testimony of Hungarians who came to this country at that time. This paper will not disprove the impressions created by the media. It will demonstrate, however, that the oral testimony of the refugees serves to clarify and give a truer picture of their experiences than published sources alone could provide.

This paper is based largely on two sources: newspaper articles from the major

Toronto dailies dealing specifically with the Hungarian refugee situation in Canada, and approximately 20 taped interviews conducted with Hungarian Canadians who emigrated in 1956 from the oral history collection of the Multicultural History Society of Ontario.

The first reports describing these Hungarians were written by journalists about the temporary refugee camps set up in Austria. It is important to note that the Hungarians of 1956 were refugees and not immigrants, the main difference between the two being that immigrants leave their homeland on their own initiative and by their own free will, refugees on the other hand are expelled from their country under certain circumstances or leave it for the sake of liberty. In the Austrian refugee camps, it was observed that many of the Hungarians were unsure whether they wanted temporary asylum or permanent resettlement.⁴ Despite the fact that the majority of Hungarian refugees left their homeland in 1956 because of fear, confusion and/or the turmoil prevalent in the country at the time, a very small percentage were ever repatriated.⁵

Canadian newspapers related stories of refugees flooding the Canadian immigration offices because they felt resentment and hostility towards the United States for that country's lack of action during the crisis.⁶ Most of the individuals interviewed revealed that their first choice of emigration was the United States, but because the quotas were already filled by that time, the second best choice was Canada. Several of the interviewees related that they knew little about Canada prior to emigration. One refugee explained her reasons for choosing Canada:

"We knew that it was a growing country where people who had initiative would be able to make a decent living. We knew that it was a neutral country. My husband was at the time still of the age where he could have been drafted; we wanted to leave all that behind and start anew."⁷

Shortly after the refugee camps were set up in Austria, one Canadian Red Cross official was quoted in a Toronto daily to have said that: "The best medicine for them (the refugees) is a chocolate bar... Those of less than fourteen years of age have never had chocolate or oranges."⁸ One interviewee, who was only fourteen years old when she emigrated with her family in 1956, recalled camp conditions somewhat differently: "Everyone just sat around all day; there wasn't much to do except play cards. The food was good except for the profusion of chocolate bars and cheese available at all times throughout the camp."⁹ According to the interviewee, everyone was thoroughly sick of chocolate by the end of the camp stay.

By November 1956, the first Hungarian refugees arrived in Canada. Newspaper reports began dealing extensively with individual refugees and the resettlement programs. The major newspapers wrote laudatory articles about the resettlement programs. The Province of Ontario set no limit on the number of refugees accepted. Authorities stated that any refugee would be accepted; no requirements or recommendations were necessary. Provincial authorities also announced that skilled personnel would go directly to the Austrian camps to seek out those who wanted to resettle in the Province.¹⁰ The published reports failed to write about the concerted effort to settle the Hungarians across Canada--sometimes at the cost of disregarding the refugees' expressed desire to live in a specific area.

Such an incident was related by George Zaduban, who was an accomplished musician when he arrived in Canada in 1957.¹¹ The airplane which brought Zaduban to this country was filled with Hungarian refugees, most of whom were under the impression that they were landing at either Montreal or Toronto. No one had any idea that they

were being taken to Edmonton, Alberta; when they landed, the irate passengers registered their protests with Canadian authorities. At this point, they were told they could go where they pleased at their own expense. Of course few of the refugees had any significant amount of money. From there one group was taken by bus to Lethbridge, where according to Zaduban, members of the local Hungarian community picked and chose amongst them as if they were examining a shipment of cattle. The healthiest, most robust individuals were chosen first for employment.

The general public was given the impression that the majority of the refugees coming to Canada were "freedom fighters" of Hungarian rebels who actually took part in the street fighting. This impression was created because many of the Hungarians who were chosen to be interviewed in the newspapers were selected on the basis of their participation in the Revolution. The exact percentage of those who actually participated in the fighting is unknown. The taped interviews reveal, however, that those Hungarians who played an active role in the Revolution were reluctant to detail their experiences during the crisis, even after more than twenty years of living in Canada. The most common reason given for this was that the interviewee still had relatives living in Hungary.

One aspect of the refugee situation which was frequently written about was the phenomenon of large group weddings. Many of the refugees were single. The various Hungarian churches were flooded with requests to perform marriages for newly-arrived refugee couples; as many as twelve couples were married at once at St. Elizabeth of Hungary Roman Catholic Church.¹² The newspaper reports failed to examine the reasons behind this phenomenon, nor did they report that the majority of these marriages ended in divorce. Mrs. Therese Lazar took part in one of these mass wedding ceremonies. After the wedding, a large reception was held for all the couples at one of the local Hungarian restaurants. Mrs. Lazar recalled that by the time the reception started, a few of the couples had already had their first marital spat.¹³ Within the first year, many of the couples married in this group had separated. According to the interviewee, most of the young people who came out in 1956 were alone, and the sudden urge to marry stemmed from a desperate need to combat loneliness and establish relationships.

Some fears were expressed by the Canadian public that because the refugees were not being screened through normal procedures, criminals and other anti-social elements were gaining entry to Canada with the refugees.¹⁴ There were reports of prisons being opened during the Revolution, freeing political prisoners as well as criminals.

A community leader in the tobacco district of southern Ontario, Paul Rapai, related the effect the refugees had in this respect in the area.¹⁵ Rapai was involved in several aspects of the relief operation. One of his duties was as translator and representative on the refugees' behalf in the Norfolk County District Court. Rapai estimated that of the 6000 refugees who initially came to the area, 100 to 120, or two percent actually had some sort of run-in with the law. The most common offenses were petty theft and disturbing the peace.

At one hearing, where 28 refugees stood before the court, the judge waived all fines and punishment for the entire group. He decided to do this because they were all young and newly-arrived. In view of the radical changes which had taken place in their lives, the judge pointed out that they should be granted additional time to get adjusted to life in Canada. The judge also issued a warning to each one of them: if they were ever arrested again anywhere in Canada for civil disobedience, the punishment levied against them would also include that which they would have received in this court. According to Rapai, only one of the 28 was ever arrested again for misconduct.

The newspaper articles were not alone in generalizations and over-simplification of the problems of the Hungarian newcomers; the studies and reports completed with regard to their resettlement and adjustment were sometimes just as misrepresentative in their assessments. In one report published in Citizen magazine, which was issued by the Citizenship branch of the government, the following observations were made concerning the refugees' working habits:

They interpreted the stress of new ideas and liberty as meaning they simply did not have to do anything they did not want to do! They would be late for work or perhaps not even show up at all! They would compare wages with others and complain when they found they were not making as much; some even walked off their jobs in defiance, feeling they should be paid more.¹⁶

Though this may have been the case in some situations, such generalizations discounted the fact that the majority of the refugees' first jobs were usually on the lowest rung of the occupational ladder. All of the twenty refugees interviewed began their lives in Canada with menial work or physical labour.

Most were highly-skilled and well-educated, they knew that this initial work was temporary and accepted this situation until they adjusted to life in Canada and learned English. They generally expressed satisfaction in the knowledge that they had worked very hard to attain their present positions. Among the interviewees was an agricultural economist who began his life in Canada as a tobacco salesman. One renowned Hungarian-Canadian filmmaker's first job when he arrived in this country was harvesting carrots. George Egri, who was the founder of a Hungarian Jewish newspaper in Toronto, began first as a mover, a cleaner in a hospital and then a salesman.¹⁷ Egri didn't mind the various jobs. He related that he was amazed at the high salary rates; in Hungary he had been earning far less. He lost his job as a cleaner in a hospital because he would finish the day's work in 3 to 4 hours and then take out a book and study English. Egri took the job as a salesman in Toronto because he thought it would advance his knowledge of English; as it turned out, it only advanced his knowledge of Italian.

On occasion, the finding of a report assessing the adjustment of the refugees contradicted the findings of another report. T. Crossen wrote about the Hungarian refugees in Canada in 1964:

Their longing for the old fatherland is generally stronger than that of most immigrants, the feeling that they have been destitute still lingers and they have not yet completely recovered their peace of mind.¹⁸

About the Hungarian refugees living in the United States, however, Alexander Weinstock wrote in 1969:

...He has probably participated in one or two anti-communist picketings, but he has not joined any Hungarian organization. His main source of news information is the English-language press. He makes no special effort to follow current developments in Hungary. He goes to the movies rather frequently, and reads books in English. He wants to stay in the United States permanently.¹⁹

Such contrasting statements occurred in studies published about refugees in different countries. Despite the fact that the Hungarian refugees of 1956 were a

homogeneous group in some respects, there were still many profound differences among the refugees themselves with regard to: socio-economic background, education and place of origin. The country which accepted the refugees also had a significant effect upon their attitudes and rate of adjustment.

To illustrate how the country of resettlement affected the refugees and to what degree, a few comparisons of the refugee situation in the United States and Canada are in order. The 37,000 Hungarian refugees had a greater impact on Canadian society than did the 41,000 in the United States, primarily because of the ratio of the refugee population to the overall population of the country.

Moreover, the refugees in the United States were settled throughout the country. The newcomers were not attracted to the established Hungarian communities which were located in the industrial urban centres of the northeast. Consequently, the Hungarian communities in the United States were not significantly affected by the newcomers.

In Canada, resettlement programs were based on the amount of assistance each province was willing to provide. Quebec and Ontario were outstanding in their resettlement efforts and as a result, the majority of the refugees settled in the urban centres of the east.²⁰ The community institutions and organizations located in these areas were considerably enhanced by the arrival of the new wave. This may be why refugees living in the United States have been perceived as a group generally alienated from the community whereas their counterparts in Canada have been credited with bringing new life to the community.

This paper attempted to demonstrate how oral testimony serves to enrich and give a more complete picture of mass migration movements, in particular of the situation of the Hungarian refugees of 1956. Such tides of human migration are usually given tremendous media attention, which although based on fact, tend to be a reflection of the social and political climate of the times. By comparing published sources with oral testimony, this paper intended to show that generalizations are difficult to make about a particular group of refugees. This is the case, even if, as in the situation of the Hungarian refugees, there are several factors common to the group.

The history of mass migration movements should be written taking into account the conflicts, struggles and contributions of the individuals involved in such migration movements. This element of the individual experience, which enhances and enriches the documentation of history, may be obtained only through oral testimony. In this paper I have tried to demonstrate that if the history of the Hungarian refugee movement of 1956 were to be written solely on the basis of media coverage and other published sources, such a history would be incomplete to say the least.

NOTES

1. "Some Observations on the Hungarian Refugee Movement", Citizen (Ottawa, 1958), p.5.
2. "Hungarian Refugees Immigration Dream, Pickersgill Reports", The Globe and Mail, 24 December 1956.
3. Allan Kent, "Pickersgill Cuts Red Tape", The Telegram, 4 December 1956.
4. Allan Kent, "Canada At Top of Refugee Poll", The Telegram, 23 November 1956.

5. T. Cnossen, Integration of Refugees: Some Observations on the Hungarians in Canada, (Research Group for European Migration Problems: The Hague, 1964), p.7.
6. Allan Kent, "Canada At Top.....", op.cit.
7. Interview with Nina Czegledy-Nagy conducted by Magda Zalan, 28 March 1978.
8. "Tells of Aid Being Given Hungarians", The Globe and Mail, 19 November 1956.
9. Name of interviewee withheld by request. Interview conducted by Susan Papp-Zubrits, 11 April 1979.
10. "No Strings Attached, Province Tells Hungarians", The Globe and Mail, 19 November 1956.
11. Interview with George Zaduban conducted by Susan Papp-Zubrits, 24 March 1979.
12. "Wedding Bells Ring Out in Free Land for New Hungarians", Toronto Daily Star, 31 December 1956.
13. Interview with Mrs. Therese Lazar conducted by Susan Papp-Zubrits, 9 January 1980.
14. "Little Current Won't Sponsor Any Hungarians", Toronto Daily Star, 17 December 1956.
15. Interview with Paul Rapai conducted by Susan Papp-Zubrits, 21 August 1979.
16. "Some Observations.....", op.cit., p.5.
17. Interview with George Egri conducted by Magda Zalan, 28 March 1978.
18. T. Cnossen, Integration of Refugees, op.cit., p.7.
19. A. Weinstock, Acculturation and Occupation: A Study of the 1956 Hungarian Refugees in the United States, (Research Group for European Migration Problems: The Hague, 1969), p.97.
20. According to Canadian Census Statistics between 1951 and 1961, the Hungarian-born population of Quebec increased by 8687; Ontario increased by 19,541. The cities of Montreal and Toronto were each augmented by over 7000.