“Just Like Other Students”

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“Just Like Other Students”: Reception of the 1956 Hungarian Refugee Students in Britain

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To my grandson, Daniel

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FOREWORD

When nearing the end of the compulsory seminar which prepared us for the leisurely years of our retirement, we were asked to outline what activities we were planning to fill all those empty hours with. I had an easy time. There was no need for me to repeat the obvious; what dozens of other future senior citizens had said—to travel widely and to see the world—nor to concoct implausible projects to be accomplished in the years to come. I was able to give a ready-made answer, since I had already decided to devote my time and energy to researching the reception of the Hungarian refugee students who came to Great Britain after the Soviet Army had crushed the 1956 revolution.

Being myself one of the refugee students, the memories of those "heroic" first years in Britain have always stayed with me, maybe somewhat faded, but never forgotten. Then, with the passage of time, I began to turn from the future to the past and my curiosity about the background of the so-called Hungarian students scheme was awakened. On our arrival in Britain we were received with much good will and generosity, and we were well looked after both during the months spent preparing to enter university life and during our years of study. However, we knew little or nothing about the people who organized our reception or how it was done. I wished to learn therefore what had induced the universities to offer their help and about the presumably very large organizational effort which had made it possible for hundreds of Hungarian students to come to this country and continue their studies here. I wished to find out how we were selected and allocated to universities, taught English in special language courses set up for us, and by what means the universities had secured the necessary financial resources to fund all this activity. I also hoped to discover how the students fared; the problems they had faced and the successes they had achieved. Briefly, I wished to research and write up the story of my generation during what was perhaps the most exciting period of their lives.

It came to my knowledge that the papers and documents of the Hungarian Office which had been entrusted with the administration of the Hungarian students scheme, and which operated between 1957 and 1962 within the University of London, had been deposited in the University's Central Archives. I assumed that these, supplemented by the records kept

by each university participating in the scheme would provide the necessary information. I hoped to rely on the help of my former colleagues—the chief librarians of British universities—to map the location and extent of these collections and to gain access to them, or to advise me whom I should approach in order to be able to carry out my research. I am happy to say that the help was more than forthcoming; I am truly grateful for all the assistance I have received from university librarians, archivists, keepers of student records and other officials who often painstakingly carried out the time-consuming groundwork for me.

The universities, former polytechnics and technical colleges I approached for information and which kindly responded to my request are listed under the sources at the end of the book. I would, however, like to single out the universities which, acting as regional centres, took the lion's share in looking after the refugee students by offering temporary accommodation on their arrival and by organizing the intensive language courses for them, and which have so readily opened their files for me: Birmingham, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Leeds, London and Oxford as well as the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick, which houses the archives of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, under whose aegis the Hungarian students scheme had been set up. The Corporation of London Records Office allowed me access to the documents relating to the establishment and management of the Lord Mayor's Fund, and the London Metropolitan Archives provided valuable information in the compilation of the list of students who had received Major County Awards which enabled them to continue their studies in the polytechnics and technical colleges of the capital.

It is regrettable that over the years some archival material had been lost, mainly in the archives and student records of the former London polytechnics, due to the major reorganization of British higher education during the past fifty years. Even more unfortunate is the loss of the archives of the former World University Service (WUS) during a transfer, since it had contained the details of over three hundred Hungarian students registered by WUS, of whom nearly one hundred had been awarded WUS scholarships for their university studies.

A substantial and probably the most interesting part of the main collection in the University of London Archives is still closed; it contains the personal records and documents of the students: notes on the interviews conducted with them and on their allocation to various universities, detailed reports issued yearly on their progress and the students' personal correspondence with the Hungarian Office. The exceptionally long closure of the archives was set up to protect the

students, and because the files will become open near the middle of this century, the students themselves will not be able to look at them or comment on them. Similarly restrictive is the strictly interpreted Data Protection Act, which prohibits referring to the names of living people unless they specifically give their consent.

Because of these restrictions, I decided to contact a number of former refugee students either through personal acquaintances or with the help of alumni offices. Many of them were willing to share their recollections with me and kindly gave their permission to quote them—often extensively—and to refer to them by name. I would like therefore to record here my thanks to the following former fellow-students: Félix Allender, László Antal, István Bátori, Tamás Csáthy, Géza Fehérvári, Péter Halmos, László Huszár, Katalin Jámbor, Ambrus Jankó, the brothers Mihály and Miklós Kruppa, Ferenc Lengyel, István Opalka, Antal Ormay, Péter Pallai, András Sándor, István Selmeczi, András and Kornélia Szabó, Kálmán Száz, András Szűcs, Béla Ulicsák, Sándor Váci, Pál and Péter Wonke, Marietta Záhonyi, Albin Závody, Iván Zmertych, Péter Zollman and András Zsigmond. After the publication of the Hungarian version of the book, further material was kindly put at my disposal by András Barabás and István Pálffy to be included in the English version.

I would also like to express my thanks to other people who were willing to be interviewed by me, among them Mrs Judith Juhász, widow of Csaba Juhász, one of the students at Imperial College and D. Mervyn Jones who, during the late 1950s was a college tutor at Exeter College in Oxford and had four Hungarian students in his charge, providing additional English tuition for them. Being a contemporary of many of the prominent people involved with the refugee students, Mervyn Jones kindly supplied me with valuable insight into their motivations and actions.

Initially, my intention was to include only the facts and figures of the Hungarian refugee students scheme in the narrative, illustrating perhaps certain aspects with the selected recollections of the former students. When writing this book however, I felt that to help the reader to understand the students' attitude and the way they responded to their new circumstances, the inclusion of more personal details might be desirable. Drawing on my own reminiscences, told and retold in the family circle over long winter evenings, I decided to regale the readers with my own motivations and experiences: what had forced me to leave Hungary and escape to the West; how I got to England by chance and after some escapades; how I was enrolled as a student at Westfield College where I was kindly received into a small student community and what hurdles I had to overcome to obtain the much coveted degree at London University.

Recalling and sharpening the memories of the student years, I was greatly helped by my husband, Lóránt Czigány, a fellow student since we began our studies at the University of Szeged in Hungary, with whom I shared all the trials and tribulations of settling down in a new and alien environment and with whom I was able to discuss all the aspects of my research and shaping the findings into a narrative. I am grateful for his advice, for his reading both the Hungarian and the English versions of the text, and providing comments, corrections and guidance. Without his encouragement, neither the research would have been carried out fully, nor the laborious task of writing the book accomplished. I am equally grateful to my daughter Judith and son-in-law John Pinfold for meticulously going through the text of the English version of the book and suggesting many necessary changes and corrections.

In depicting the slow and often tiresome process of assimilation of the students to their new circumstances I was able to draw on the findings of the survey of the Hungarian refugee students carried out by two students of sociology at the LSE, Alan Dare and Paul Hollander, in the autumn of 1958 as a project for their diplomas. They questioned a large number of the Hungarian students about their views and attitudes in great detail; the tables compiled from the answers and the comments by the students quoted extensively in the text of the report, provided an insight into their feeling at that time, undimmed by later experiences. Quotations from Hungarian sources were translated into English by myself; I alone am responsible for any misquotations, misinterpretations and mistakes.

In the 1950s, with the memory of our experiences still fresh in our minds, we often said that we had a more than ample collection of stories to tell our children and grandchildren. It is therefore a source of great happiness for me that, inspired by the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the 1956 Hungarian revolution, my own grandson shows an increasing interest in the past of his grandparents, especially in their participation in the revolution and their student years in this country. I hope that this book will help to preserve the memories of the past and pass them on to the next generation. Therefore, I dedicate it to my grandson, Daniel.

London, 15 March 2008

CHAPTER I

THE EXODUS

The room was sparsely furnished, with a large, well-scrubbed wooden table in the middle. The faint light shed by the naked light bulb hanging from the centre of the ceiling barely enabled the three students, all from the University of Szeged, to read the names of the villages on either side of the Austro-Hungarian border, since the letters on the old, well-worn map, spread out on top of the table, had become blurred. Not as if they had any chance to choose in advance the spot where they would try to leave the country in a few days time. They only knew that they had to escape, because they had no other choice. It was mid-November and they were ready to depart. During the revolution one of them, Lóránt Czigány, had taken up arms and joined the university battalion, which was put in charge of the barracks on the outskirts of the town, after they had been vacated in a hurry by the ÁVH, the hated secret police. Although he had never fired a single shot, he was convinced that severe punishment would be meted out to him. István Bátori, the other student, had gone home at the end of October to the nearby town of Szarvas, where he had volunteered for the newly set up local revolutionary home guard. Now, having returned to Szeged, he also had reason enough to fear what might happen to him if he decided to stay.

I was the third student, an elected member of the University Revolutionary Committee, who, in the belief that we would win the revolution, also had gone home to Kalocsa, a small town on the Danube in Southern Hungary, to check that my family was all right. After November 4th, when the Russian tanks had crushed the revolution, I returned against all advice to Szeged, because I was unwilling to accept that the promise of the glorious, intoxicating days of late October would never be fulfilled, or that the freedom we had only just won would be engulfed again by the all-pervasive slavery of communist ideology and practice. The student hostels were closed and we congregated in the flat of our fellow student, Marica Csetri, whose parents most generously—and not without risk—opened their doors to us, and offered a bed to those who had no other accommodation in town. We fervently debated what might happen to the

country, to the university, to us. Our hope diminished day by day, as we were forced to realize that only the worst possible scenario could follow. I would be dismissed from the university – and this would be only a "mild" retaliation. My background and pervious history offered enough ammunition to the university authorities to judge my participation in the revolution with the utmost severity.

I had already been told firmly and unequivocally, at the age of fourteen, that because of my "clericalist and bourgeois" family background, I would not be educated "at the expense of the working class", would not be allowed to pursue any intellectual career or to be offered a white collar job in my life, but was destined to do physical labour, to which, rather to my surprise and regret, I was little suited. It was the summer of 1950 and I had just finished class VIII in the newly restructured school system. I loved studying and regularly achieved top marks and had no doubt that I would proceed to the local grammar school in September. So, when we heard that the pass list had been posted on the door of the class room, I rushed to inspect it. To my astonishment, the space where the name of the school, in which I was supposed to continue my studies should have been inserted, was left empty. It must be a mistake, an unfortunate omission, I thought. However, after sustained enquiries I was told, that as a child of a family, which could only be regarded as the "enemy of the people", I would receive no further state education.

Private education in my home town, of course, did not exist.

True, the family might have been accused to be under the influence of the Church, as one of my uncles was a priest, a Franciscan friar, in charge of the instruction of novices to the order in Hungary. Or, rather, he had been, since after the dissolution of the order in the previous year, he had been working as an unskilled labourer in one of the depots of the Hungarian railways. That we also had a nun in the family, we never even whispered about. She entered a convent as a young girl in Pozsony, and when my grandparents and their other children were expelled to Hungary after the First World War and the town became Bratislava in the newly created Czechoslovakia, she stayed there, so it was easy for us to keep silent about her existence. My father represented the "bourgeois" element. With great determination he had left the peasant existence of his family behind, learned a trade and opened a watchmaker and jeweller's shop in Kalocsa. He was respected in the town, widely liked and supported and due to his hard work, he was able to save enough to have a new house built in the desirable suburb called Burghers' Garden, after his first, more modest house had been swept away by the disastrous flood of the Danube

in the spring of 1941. Before the Second World War he may have employed an assistant, but I was never aware of it; to my knowledge, he certainly never was or exploited anyone as a "capitalist ogre". One might say that the "bourgeois" and "clericalist" strands were combined in the commission he received from the local archbishopric: he was put in charge of all the clocks in the diocese. It was obvious that his enemies wished to punish him by barring me from further education.

The family refused to acquiesce in the decision: petition after petition was sent to anyone who might be able to advance our cause. Private teachers were sought out— retired, elderly men, who were brave enough to teach the children barred from the grammar school—and employed to give lessons in mathematics, chemistry and physics in order to prepare them for joining their classes if the decision were to be suddenly reversed. Slowly, a year went by and we had to accept defeat; all hope for a change seemed to be in vain, the regime stood firm, the unrelenting oppression reached and controlled all walks of life. Some of the replies to the petitions, however, outlined a possible, although rather long-term solution; after years of physical labour, which—one could only assume—"purified" the worker from all "bourgeois" tendencies, he would be allowed to follow part-time studies for the Hungarian equivalent of the GCE certificate. Accordingly, I was sent to work. First in a remote state-owned agricultural establishment, where concrete bunkers without any facilities served as accommodation for the labour force—food was brought to us in the fields. We hoed and weeded the unending rows of potatoes, marrows and cucumbers, or picked fruit and vegetables from sunrise to sunset. I desperately tried to do my best, but to no avail; I was the last among the hoers and never reached the target set for the pickers. At the end of season I was transferred to the paprika mill in my hometown, which is famous for producing the best "noble sweet" paprika powder in the country. My task was to thread the newly harvested red spice peppers onto a long string for hanging them up to dry in preparation for the milling. Again, I was rather useless: the needle pricked my fingers more often than passed through the stems of the paprika and no group of workers accepted me willingly as a member, because my contribution seriously lowered their required output.

By late autumn a new job was on offer, perhaps I would be more suited to help out in a kitchen. A simple, basic lunch was provided for about fifty to sixty people by two of us: a middle-aged cook and myself. I had to do all the preparation, such as peeling potatoes, cleaning the vegetables, washing up the dirty dishes and helping with the serving of the food. As the kitchen had no running water, it was also my task to fetch buckets of water from the well in the yard. So, I was rushing out umpteen times a day

from the hot, steaming kitchen into the freezing air outside and it was no wonder that before the end of the year I contracted rheumatic fever, which then, in the absence of antibiotics, often proved fatal. My illness however, seemed to give me my lucky break. I was assigned to the care of Dr. Szántó, a GP and prominent party member, who might have felt some pity for my plight and interceded with the authorities on by behalf. Or, as the timing of my convalescence coincided with one of the temporary relaxations of the unremitting persecution of the "enemies of the people", the authorities might have relented and, to my delight, in the middle of January 1952, I received the long awaited permission to enter class I of the grammar school. Due to the instruction I had received, and to the extensive reading of literature and history books, which my mother had encouraged me to do, I sailed through the end of year exams in June and was allowed to take the second year exams during the summer. My teachers bent over backwards to extract from me the right answers—most of the exams were oral—and readily gave me the marks necessary to pass in all subjects. In September I was therefore able to rejoin my former class-mates and to obtain the GCE with distinction in 1954.

My experiences made me cautious in applying for a university place. Although I would have liked to pursue medical studies to become a doctor, I did not dare to put my name forward for this much coveted subject. I decided to study Hungarian language, literature and history instead. Nor did I dare to submit an application to any of the universities in Budapest, but chose a provincial university, the University of Szeged, in the hope that no particular attention would be paid to me and my background among the other applicants, probably relatively few in number and just about enough to fill the university's prescribed quota. Again, my luck held: during the interview I was quizzed about my favourite author and I took the chance to talk about Dickens, many of whose novels I had avidly read in Hungarian translation among the remnants of my uncle's discarded library which had come into my possession. One of the professors conducting the interview happened to be also a fan of Dickens and after a brief discussion of *A tale of two cities*, he more or less indicated that I would be accepted as a student. Moreover, I was awarded a so-called "Rákosi scholarship", a much larger monthly sum than the "ordinary" grant, named after the Communist dictator, Mátyás Rákosi. My friend, who was also interviewed for a university place, and I had discovered the notice about the grant posted on a board in the corridor of the Faculty of Arts, obtained the relevant forms and against the stern advice of our headmaster, submitted the application and during the rest of the summer holiday, we happily forgot all about it. Most probably no one else applied

from Szeged and to our surprise—and consternation—we were singled out as the two freshers who had been awarded this "prestigious" grant. I was convinced that I would be regarded with suspicion by the other students as a stool pigeon of the party amongst them. Comrade Karácsonyi, the university's party secretary however, soon discovered the truth: instead of being a promising young Communist cadre, I was an unreliable "class alien". He warned me not to apply for the continuation of the grant the following year, as he would make sure that I would not get it. During the first two academic sessions therefore, I endeavoured to be as inconspicuous as possible: willingly participating in all compulsory activities but never assuming any leading role, happy being counted amongst the hard working elite but never excelling in any particular subject.

It was therefore utterly unexpected when Comrade Karácsonyi issued to me an unequivocal order just before the summer break, that I should take on the role of DISZ secretary in my class during the coming 1956/57 session. DISZ (Union of Working Youth) was the Communist party's youth organization, and the appointed secretaries were either trusted current or potential party members. Comrade Karácsonyi knew very well that I was neither. That spring, there was general dissatisfaction with, or even agitation against Rákosi and his regime. We, the students at Szeged we were aware of it, but at that time, having lost my father in February, I cared little about politics. Instead, I practised every evening with the university choir; we were to participate in the international festival at Llangollen. Of course, nothing came of it and, at my instigation, some of us began corresponding with the third year students in the University of Kolozsvár (Cluj in Romania), who were also studying Hungarian, with the aim of visiting each other and even spending a semester at each others' institutions. This idea must have sprung from the liberating unrest felt in the whole country and we were convinced that it was bold but achievable, when in truth, it was no more than a naive and rather dangerous dream. (Imagine the Romanian government's reaction to it: an attempt to export the unrest to another socialist country—the reason why the satellite countries in East Europe were hermetically sealed not only from the West, but also from one another—and to awaken the slumbering nationalistic feelings in the Hungarian minority in Transylvania!)

I dared not argue with Comrade Karácsonyi and was looking forward to my DISZ role with dismay. We—the newly appointed DISZ secretaries, some party members and students who were deemed reliable comrades—were called in by telegram a week before the semester started to attend a special seminar discussing university reforms. Leaders of the university's

Communist party informed us of the introduction of free choice: not all subjects would be compulsory, not even Russian, not all lectures need be attended, not even the Marxist-Leninist courses and we ourselves could draw up within limits our own course plans and timetable. There would be no more organized excursions into neighbouring villages to "admonish" the peasants about their "socialist duties" and no more forced participation in seasonal agricultural work, where the students in any case did more harm than good. Responsibilities for us, for our studies and education, up to then the privilege of the university authorities, would be devolved to us and we must be prepared to take them on. Heady stuff, but as the seminar progressed, we began to realize that what the party really wanted was to retain control, at least indirectly. Through us, the leaders of the students, the party could ensure that the new rules would be still shaped according to their rules and instructions. The students would trust us, because we would be communicating these exciting changes to them. And, of course, we would report back to the party. What the party members did not realize was that they had let the genie out of the bottle. We rightly interpreted their fake enthusiasm for the changes as disguised fear and it fuelled our demands for more substantial reforms, their cautiousness spurring us into action. With responsibility bestowed on us, we also embraced power; we felt liberated to voice our wishes and act upon them. And this was only the beginning.

October 1956 was immensely busy and exciting. We attended only those lectures we deemed relevant and interesting, developed our own study projects and, for the very first time, carried out our own research. The political changes taking place were fervently debated, the demands of the students formulated and re-formulated day by day. In addition, during the night we shovelled paprika into wagons at the local railway station in order to earn money for our planned excursion to Kolozsvár University. We were aware that at the general meeting of all students on 16 October, when we decided to set up our own union, called MEFESZ (Union of Hungarian University and College Students) in defiance of DISZ, we had boldly taken an irrevocable political stance against the whole Communist regime. Fear and timidity deserted us; the daring we exhibited was based on the firm conviction that we did not act alone, but that the whole country was behind us. So, on the evening of October 23rd, when in support of the students' marches in Budapest, we and with us the whole population of the town occupied the streets and squares, shouting, singing, reciting poetry, each one of us alone and all together with one single voice, we swept away the lies of the past eight years and dared to break the silence of fear imposed on us against our will.

Over the next few days the authorities tried to regain their lost ground. They mobilized the police force, posted the secret police and the army at strategic points, prohibited any assembly in public places and threatened those who dared to demonstrate with armed response; they were ready to shoot into the crowd. A curfew was declared after dark. Small groups of students played cat and mouse with the police to try and break it. The leaders of the university—among them the rector, Professor Dezső Baróti himself—were aware of the seriousness of the situation. They tried to collect the students and take them off the streets and move them to the nearest student hostel for safety. It was thus that we female students ended up in the hostel for male students for the night. In the morning we were allowed to return to our own hostel. In the porter's lodge Comrade Karácsonyi awaited us, with a notebook in his hand to enter in it the names of the disobedient students. "You too, Comrade Salacz?" he asked me. "Yes, me too, Comrade Karácsonyi", I replied defiantly. By the end of October the revolution seemed to be victorious and at the next general meeting of the students we set up the Revolutionary Committee of the University. My name was put forward to represent the students of the Arts Faculty on the Committee and I was duly elected. Although I was somewhat dubious about the person who proposed me—a devout party member in year four—and suspected his intentions as nothing but provocation, I was happy to serve even if our miraculous experiment were to fail and I were to reap all the consequences of my actions.

These were my thoughts in the flat of Marica's parents in mid-November. Surely, there was no future for me at Szeged and I would be lucky if my punishment was merely expulsion from the university. People were imprisoned for lesser "misdeeds". Were they to allow me to complete my studies, I would be in no better position. A teacher of Hungarian history, most probably in a provincial grammar school, I would have to stand in front of the class and talk about the "counter revolution" of 1956, staged by a bloodthirsty reactionary mob. I would have to repeatedly tell lies to my pupils, therefore knowingly defaming that glorious unique moment that we all felt had been worth living for. I had no other choice but to leave my home and escape to the West.

It is far from my intention here to write a personal history. However, during the last fifty years accusations have occasionally been levelled against the Hungarian refugees, in particular against the younger men and women among them—in some cases even in the guise of genuine research, seemingly supported by independent sociological surveys—that the great majority of those who escaped did so purely to seek adventure and an easy route to riches. It was alleged that they did not take part in the revolution,

did not fight the invading Soviet Army—even if they claimed so subsequently—and probably held no political views at all, but seized the opportunity offered by the brief opening of the border with Austria and crossed the Iron Curtain in the hope of a better, more prosperous life in the West. They were no more than adventurers, in search of quick gains. As long as these accusations were made by historians, first and foremost by Julianna Puskás[1], commissioned by the Kádár regime to carry out research on Hungarian émigrés in the United States, there seemed to be no need to refute them, since their motives were more than transparent. It was well known that to obtain permission for undertaking such a project, the researcher must have been vetted and found to be a reliable cadre who was willing to accept the strings attached to the commission, including a pre-determined slant on what the findings should be. It is therefore regrettable that their distortions have found their way into scholarly works such as Béla Várdy's justifiably acclaimed magnum opus on Hungarians in America, in which he describes the 1956 refugees thus: "The vast majority of them were totally apolitical who left their home simply because the borders, closed till then, suddenly and unexpectedly were opened. They left partly in the hope of greater opportunities, partly driven by the sense of adventure dormant in all youth, to find out what the West could offer to them."[2] Or, a few paragraphs later, quoting Puskás's "well phrased" assessment of the young 1956 refugees verbatim: "Their pampering only stopped… when after the initial enthusiastic propaganda it began to come to light that very few of them actually fought in the revolution and the motivation of their flight was not political at all."[3] While Puskás acknowledges that their escape might also have been induced by fear, she limits that to the experiences they might have gained in the first half of the fifties, as if there had been no persecutions, trials and severe, often inhuman, punishment after the revolution was crushed. The premonition of these horrors to come by those who decided to leave was, indeed, truly justified. Assuming that Puskás was also well aware of this possible

[1] See Puskás, Julianna: Elvándorlások Magyarországról 1945 óta és a magyar diaszpóra néhány jellegzetessége az 1970-es években. (Migrations from Hungary since 1945 and some characteristics of the Hungarian diaspora in the 1970-ies.) In: Molnár, J., Orbán, S. and Urbán, K. eds.: *Tanulmányok a magyar népi demokrácia negyven évéről. (*Studies about the forty years of the peoples' democracy). Budapest, 1985. p.251.

[2] Várdy, Béla: *Magyarok az Újvilágban: az észak-amerikai magyarság rendhagyó története.* (Hungarians in the New World: an irregular history of the North-American Hungarians.) Budapest, 2000. p.450.

[3] Ibid. p.451.

motivation, she could not express it in the Kádár years without forfeiting the publication of the results of her research or even without endangering herself. Várdy has, however, little excuse for accepting Puskás's statements without critical evaluation. His references are still overshadowed by the bitter prejudice and ill-concealed displeasure with which the former "displaced persons" or "DPs" regarded the hordes of refugees. The "DPs" like himself, had endured hardship when after the Second World War they settled in the USA, while desperately trying to maintain standards. To them the newcomers were loud, uncouth and likely to be imbued with Communism, yet they were welcomed by the West with open arms and open purses.

My own experiences and ponderings were only one of many: the recollections of the former refugee students then and now speak unanimously of grief and the feeling of hopelessness and fear. They anticipated the worst. One of them, a well-regarded businessman with a successful career in electronics in Canada, for example, writing to the alumni association in his old university at Glasgow, begins his brief biography with the sentence: "Had they [the Russians or the Hungarian authorities] caught me, I would have certainly been hanged within weeks." He does not exaggerate; elected to the Revolutionary Committee of the Technical University of Budapest, he was soon delegated as the student representative to the Revolutionary Committee of the Armed Forces in charge of the capital—to which he modestly does not even refer in his letter. Hiding after the Russian invasion in a nearby village, he heard that the newly formed workers' militia was looking for him and there and then decided to leave the country.[4]

But the prerequisite for punishment did not need to be a heroic action; a small gesture was deemed to be enough: smiling encouragement for the demonstrators from an upstairs window, being one of the crowd surging ahead on the street, shouting with the others "Russians go home", helping to cut out the Soviet-style coat of arms from the Hungarian tricolour, pulling down the red star from the top of a building, printing or distributing leaflets listing the demands of the people, editing a "free" newspaper, publicly voicing an opinion of dissent, tending the wounded, burying the dead, or serving in the new institutions of the revolution. The simple knowledge that the ever-present and vigilant comrade karácsonyis had scribbled a student's name and his "misdeeds" into their notebooks, gave him enough reason to contemplate escape. It was the fear of reprisal that pushed the thousands of students across the Hungarian border.

[4] Interview with Tamás Csáthy. 16 Feb. 2006.

Paul Hollander, a refugee Hungarian student reading sociology at the London School of Economics and his friend and fellow student, Alan Dare, carried out in 1958 a survey among the Hungarian students studying in Great Britain. Their aim was to discover how the students had managed to settle down and with what degree of success they had begun the lengthy and often painful process of assimilation.[5] They distributed 350 questionnaires of which 279 were returned, a very high proportion, especially if we consider the suspicion with which such requests were received and the reluctance of the students—who still vividly remembered the bitter experiences of the Rákosi years—to reveal anything about themselves, even anonymously. Among other details, the students were quizzed about their background, when and why they decided to emigrate. They could choose from seven possible answers, but the choice was not limited to giving only a single one. In some cases, especially those picked by most students, the wording and therefore the content of both the questions and answers somewhat overlapped, and would have influenced the interpretation of the responses, had they not registered overwhelmingly the chief reasons for leaving Hungary as: "lack of individual rights", quoted 182 times, "danger to life and personal freedom" chosen by 167 students and "collapse of the revolution" – which, of course, echoed the sentiment of the previous two replies - nominated by 126 persons. 113 students indicated that they had also considered the opportunity to study in the West when they made their decision, but a large majority of them still believed that after they had acquired foreign languages and obtained their qualifications abroad, they would return to Hungary. The range of possible answers included the ominous "curiosity, desire for adventure" and it duly featured as the reason for leaving Hungary in 51 of the returned forms. However, two years after the revolution, a large majority of the students studying in Britain still clearly stated that they were forced to become refugees through sheer desperation and by the fear of reprisals.[6] The replies to the previous question ("When did you first think of leaving Hungary?") reinforces this perception; during the revolution only five persons contemplated leaving, while after the Soviets crushed it, 149 of them considered emigrating.[7]

Dare and Hollander encouraged the students to send in their comments; some of these read as moving personal confessions about the years of oppression: they talk of the lies everyone had to adopt simply to survive,

[5] Dare, Alan and Hollander, Paul: *Hungarian students in Great Britain. Past experiences – present attitudes.* London, 1959. Typescript.
[6] Ibid. Table 30, p.XXXV.
[7] Ibid. Table 29, p.XXXV.

of the enforced hypocrisy of the whole Communist system and of the desperation that all of this would now surely return. “I was always afraid”—writes one of them. “Even in comparison with my countrymen, I was more frightened and had fewer rights. The Communists lied constantly and they wanted to make me lie as well. One was always forced to be deceitful.” Or, another statement: “The regime’s propaganda that progress towards Communism was the supreme object was only a lie; this fundamental lie and the contradictions following from it made life unbearable.” And listing what was unbearable: “The basic contradiction in the system, between theory and practice; the constant obligation to lie; the unbearable lack of confidence…”[8] This is what induced most of the students to leave their homeland. Having sampled freedom for a few intoxicating days, they refused to accept that the restrictions on every aspect of life would return. They wanted to start a new life without lies and fear in a country where one had personal freedom and rights and need not expect reprisals.

The scale of the reprisals only came to light after the change of regime in 1989, when at least some of the classified documents relating to 1956 were released. Even for a seemingly insignificant action during the so-called “counter-revolution” the perpetrator might have had to stand trial, be found guilty and sent to prison. A relatively mild punishment for a student included suspension for one or two semesters, however, a large number of them were expelled. The Council of the University of Szeged, at its meeting on 21st December 1989, named all those who had participated in some way or other in the revolution and suffered recrimination in 1957: the list contains the names of 38 university teachers and 82 students. As in the academic year 1956/57 the number of day students at Szeged University reached only 890, almost 10% of the student population was singled out for punishment. According to the Council minutes, 48 students from the three faculties of the University (Arts, Law and Sciences) were expelled during the spring and summer of 1957 and were barred from studying at any higher education institution in the country. The expelled students included those 31 who were known to have left the country. Six students were suspended for an academic year and another six indefinitely, fifteen received a severe reprimand, four a reprimand and two were cautioned. Four students were acquitted and the disciplinary procedures were still ongoing in the case of two.[9]

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[8] Ibid. p.60.

[9] Bólya, Lajos, rector: *Jelentés a Szegedi tudományegyetem 1956-57. tanévi munkájáról. Hallgatói fegyelmi ügyek.* (Report on the work of the University of

The minutes of the Council of the Arts Faculty in September 1957 provide details of the punishment meted out to twelve named arts students. The student receiving the heaviest punishment, suspension for two semesters, was my fellow third year student, Etelka Fekete. Her "crime" is explained in the table, compiled for the book on the history of setting up MEFESZ, which also includes material on the reprisals: Etelka was among the students who collected donations to help cover the burial costs of the single victim of the revolution at Szeged, an eighteen year old worker, named Lajos Schwarz, who was shot by an army squad in the early days of the revolution.[10] This small, humane gesture proved to be enough for the then university authorities to set an intimidating example in her case. Yet, her background met all the requirements of the regime: her mother worked in a kolkhoz, lived in poor circumstances, and, according to the notes taken, she would not have been able to support her daughter during the suspension year. The Council therefore decided to recommend that Etelka should work as a semi-skilled labourer during her punishment.

The students who instigated the break with the Communist youth organization (DISZ) and were instrumental in setting up MEFESZ, received, after lengthy detention and trial, several years of imprisonment. And for those released from prison during the Kádár years punishment continued uninterrupted until 1989: they and even their families were stigmatized and discriminated against. They had no rights, received no recognition and in a sense existed outside society. It was therefore right and proper of the Council of the University of Szeged in 1989 to pass the following resolution: "Many of the University's respected members and students became the victims of politically motivated and denigrating procedures and of their serious consequences… The Council declares those procedures and the decisions then reached at the time to be contrary to the spirit of *universitas* and distances itself from them; it expresses its regret to those persecuted and to their relatives and regards them as belonging in perpetuity to the community of the *alma mater*." [11]

Although most students shared the main reasons for choosing to emigrate, the road leading to the final decision varied greatly. Some of

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Szeged during the session 1956-57. Disciplinary action against students.) MOL, Box XIX-I-2-f/241.

[10] Kiss, Tamás: *Magyar Egyetemisták és Főiskolások Szövetsége 1956 – Szeged.* (The Union of Hungarian University and College Students 1956 – Szeged.) 2nd ed., Budapest, 2002, pp.169-173.

[11] A Szegedi Tudományegyetem Egyetemi Tanácsa: *Jegyzőkönyv az 1989. december hó 21-én megtartott ülésről.* (Council of the University of Szeged. *Minutes of the meeting of 21 December 1989.*) Resolutions no. 114-115/1989.

them left the country during the revolution on a specific mission, representing, for example, the revolutionary committees of the universities and seeking the support of the West, first and foremost of the national and international student organizations. When they heard the news of the invading Soviet army, they realized there was little merit in their returning as they would be soon caught by the military, Russian or Hungarian. They would be able to do more, and more effectively for Hungary, if they stayed abroad.[12] Some of them were warned by their parents not to go back and indeed, some of the parents themselves decided to leave the country. It is ironic, that the mother of András Sándor, one of the delegates of the Revolutionary Committee of the Budapest ELTE University, arrived in Vienna on 26th November to dissuade him from returning to Hungary, on the very same day as András, on board of one of the specially chartered aircraft to bring Hungarian students to Britain, landed at Blackbushe airfield. His mother also decided to stay in the West and they met only years later, in 1963, in New York.[13] Other students were in the delegation of Hungarian politicians, who in the name of the Prime Minister, Imre Nagy and the revolutionary government of Hungary, sought intervention by the United Nations.[14] Initially, a large number of students decided to await the outcome, many of them in hiding, hoping that all was not yet lost and that at least some of the demands expressed during the revolution might still be met, or that help would be coming from Western countries, first and foremost from the United Nations. When the West did not stir and persecution began to grow, they also left for the Austrian frontier. One of the most heartrending stories was that of a boy, only eighteen years old, who, when going home in a dark November evening, was met a few streets away from their house by his father, who was waiting for him. He was told that he could not go home as someone had denounced him as having taken up arms during the revolution and the police had already searched the house with a warrant for his arrest. He gave his son a small bundle with a few items deemed necessary for the journey into the unknown, advised him whom to seek out should he arrive safely in the West and bade him farewell then and there, seeing him perhaps for the last time.[15]

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[12] See: Gömöri, György: Oxfordi egyetemisták a magyar szabadságért. (Students of Oxford for Hungarian liberty.) In: *Az 1956-os Magyar Forradalom Történetének Dokumentációs és Kutatóintézete. Évkönyv III.* 1994, p.27-34.

[13] Interview with András Sándor. 31 Oct. 2004.

[14] See, for example: Bujdosó, Alpár: *299 nap.* (299 days.) Budapest, 2003.

[15] Interview with Péter Pallai. 25 Sept. 2004. See also: Bogyay, Katalin: *The voice of freedom. Remembering the 1956 revolution.* London, 2006, p.96.

Many of those whose application for a university place had been rejected on political grounds or those who were expelled from the universities for reasons often not even explained to them, also decided to emigrate. Their aim was to study abroad and to build their careers without obstruction, something which was denied to them in their own country. Perhaps they could be labelled "economic migrants", but hardly adventurers. Although not as students, they might have participated in the events of late October, might even have fought the Russians and they had reason enough to fear the reprisals. But even for those not involved in the uprising, what could the future offer? They had already been cast away by the previous regime, and the new one, taking an equally hard line, would not be more lenient. For the men and women, imprisoned during Rákosi's regime and freed by the revolution, there was only one option: they also had to leave Hungary. They knew that they would be rounded up, thrown back into the jails, accused with "new crimes" they had probably not committed, and their sentences would be increased manifold.

Such prisoners were László Jámbor and his wife, Kati. László Jámbor initially entered the medical university in Budapest to become a doctor, but after two years wanted to transfer to the University of Economics. His request was refused on the grounds that "he had already wasted enough money of the Peoples' Republic", but he was allocated a place in the Russian Institute, where, understandably, there were plenty of vacancies. By the early 1950s he had become involved with a group of malcontents who were, rather naively, plotting resistance, stockpiling Second World War ammunition found in the Buda hills, so that they would be ready for fighting as partisans if and when Hungary would be freed by the West. The group and its activities were revealed to the ÁVH, the secret police, and all its members were arrested, except László, who managed to escape and hide in a picturesque village, called Kesztölc, in the Pilis mountains, where local resistance was also fermenting. He helped with the production and distribution of leaflets—they had so little funds at their disposal that they stole a radio from the workers' club and sold it in order to cover at least some of the printing costs. Kati, László's fiancée, an arts student in Budapest, acted as a liaison person between members of the resistance group and participated in the leafleting action. When the undercover agent of the ÁVH, who had infiltrated the group, demanded the delivery of the text for a new batch of leaflets, Kati gave it to him and he promptly passed it to the police. Both László and Kati, together with the other members of the group were taken into custody. A show-trial was mounted and exemplary sentences were passed on 7 October 1952: two of the Kesztölc

leafleteers were executed, László got life-imprisonment, Kati first fifteen, then after appeal, ten years in prison.[16]

They met again only four years later, in early November 1956, after the political prisoners had been set free by the revolutionary forces. A friend offered temporary accommodation to them in her parents' house in Budapest, until they could decide what they wanted to do. Kati's mother, a devout and conservative woman, would only acquiesce to this arrangement if they promptly got married in a church—not an easy task to arrange a wedding ceremony in the general upheaval. Fortunately, the local vicar lived only a few houses away and was willing to do the honours. Within days, László and Kati knew they had no other choice, but to leave the country. The first step was to obtain an official marriage certificate from the registry office in the local town hall. One could assume that this type of request was not unique when thousands contemplated emigration; the registrar pulled in witnesses from among the passers-by in the street and issued the documents without any delay. The small group of political prisoners embarked on their journey to the Austrian frontier mid-November. They had no money, with the exception of a few hundred forints, a tiny sum given to one of them, a girl called Juli, by the Israeli consulate, because when seeking support, she said that she intended to emigrate to Israel. Yet, she nearly gave it up and only at the strenuous encouragement of the others climbed onto the back of the lorry. What they could rely on however, was the network of former fellow prisoners who provided them with accommodation, food and advice on their way across Transdanubia. A few days later László and Kati Jámbor crossed the border at the small village of Sopronhorpács and headed first to Vienna, and then to England.[17]

Finally there should also be mention of those who left, or tried to leave Hungary before 1956. Many of them were Jewish children, who were herded up during the last months of the Second World War, to be taken to the concentration camps abroad and of whom only a few survived. Some others left the country with the retreating Hungarian Army, but returned home in 1945 with their families. There were also those, who wanted to emigrate after the Communist takeover but were caught and duly punished for their failed attempt. The story of Sándor Váci, now an independent architect, working mainly in the City of London, might be singled out as

[16] For the details of this small resistance movement see: Fáy, Zoltán: Röplapszórók. Egy ellenállási mozgalom 1952-ben: a kesztölci összesküvés. (The leafleteers. A resistance movement in 1952: the Kesztölc conspirary.) *Magyar Nemzet,* 16 Oct. 2004.

[17] Interview with Katalin Jámbor. 6 Jan. 2005.

an example. Still a baby, he was taken by his family to France a few months before the outbreak of the war. They hoped to settle near Lille and to set up a factory manufacturing putty, for which there was enough demand by the local vegetable growers for the insulation of their greenhouses. They had barely settled down in their new environment, when war was declared. They were expelled as aliens and after many vicissitudes ended up at Trieste in Italy, and finally, now penniless, returned to the Hungarian town of Vác, from where they had started their epic journey. Sándor Váci's father died on the Eastern front where he was serving in a forced labour unit of the Hungarian army. His mother's attempt to cross the border to the West in the 1950s was unsuccessful. Lumbered with all this emotional package, Váci grew up and obtained his GCE in June 1956, but being of bourgeois origin, he was not admitted to the College of Design, where he wanted to study. However, he is now convinced that the deprivation he received as a boy bolstered both his compassion and self-esteem: people never felt greater solidarity with each other than during the tyrannical Rákosi years, when everyone received an equal share of misery, persecution and poverty. During the revolution he was more of a bystander; he witnessed the important events, but did not take up arms. He does not regard himself a hero, but still despairs about losing a little piece of Stalin's monumental bronze statue which was pulled down and broken up by the joyous crowd. He left Hungary again with his family in1956, more curious than expectant about finding opportunities only freedom could offer.[18]

During November and December Radio Free Europe incessantly broadcast coded messages under assumed names of those who had managed to escape. These were to allay the anxiety of members of their family and friends still in Hungary. However, they also encouraged those who prepared themselves to head for the border. "If they were able to escape, why not us?"—many posed the question, hoping for the best. Crossing the border was not without danger. The first refugees, who crossed soon after 4th November, were mostly from nearby towns and villages. They were able to walk across the open border and needed not to fear the mines, barbed wire or soldiers firing at anyone crossing no man's land. The Western media, in full gear, waited for them on the Austrian side, taking pictures of their smiling faces or of them tearfully gathering a last handful of earth from their homeland.

By mid-November however, the Russians and some of the Hungarian border guards had closed in and on 22nd November the first snow of the

[18] Interview with Sándor Váci. 23 Feb. 2006.

winter fell, making the escape more difficult: it was easy to pinpoint and apprehend the escapees haltingly negotiating the frozen furrows in the snow covered fields. Every refugee has his or her own story. The experiences they gained would furnish them with ample material to tell their children and grandchildren in years to come: how they managed to secure the last place in an already overloaded lorry, how they alighted from the train stopping on the open track, miles away from the nearest city, where the police were waiting for them at the railway station. How kindly the villagers helped them, put them up for the night, fed them and offered advice on the best way to avoid the quickly moving Russian troops. How much they had to pay to the guide who would take them right up to frontier and how anxiously they hoped that it really was only a few steps away when he left them alone. How they caught their breath when a fallen twig broke under their foot, making a terrifyingly sharp burst of noise in the silence of the woods. How they listened petrified to the barking of the police dogs and waited by lying down in the furrows for the darkness to envelop them again when the flares, fired by the army, brightly illuminated the whole landscape. How would they know that they arrived on Austrian soil? Was this the last icy stream they had to cross, the bridge leading to the other side? Or, had they gone back into Hungary because of the irregularities of the border? Were they walking towards a single source of light—presumably a village in Austria—or going around it in circles? Of the common experience of all refugees, let us quote one story, which demonstrates not only the vicissitudes they had to overcome, but also their determination, courage and perseverance which drove them towards freedom.

Antal Ormay, an arts student studying journalism, was a member of the delegation from Budapest visiting Győr, a major town in Transdanubia, where the Revolutionary Council was still resisting the invading army, and operating the last remaining "free radio" in the country. Ormay, who was relaying and collecting messages, offered his help to the Council, trying to bury his desperation in feverish activities. However, he soon realized that all was in vain, and that the revolution was irrevocably crushed. He was warned that the police were looking for him; they had already searched his lodgings. It would have been futile to go back to Budapest, as he would be caught there too. Ormay decided to emigrate. He recalled what he had learned in his geography lessons: Győr is a town where three rivers meet to join the Danube, one of them, the Rábca, has its source somewhere in the swamps of Lake Fertő, which straddles the Austro-Hungarian border. The Rábca could serve as guide for him; he only has to follow it upstream. This was a route no one took. Alone, he had not only to conquer the

considerable distance, but also the creeping November frost, his numbing loneliness and awakening doubts. Some workmen repairing the river bank said that if he kept going, he would reach a hut before dusk fell, where he would be welcomed to stay overnight. But the hut was dark, its door locked, seemingly abandoned. Ormay, utterly exhausted, prised open one of the windows, climbed in and slumped on the bed and fell asleep as he was, with his overcoat and shoes still on.

At dawn he was woken up by someone banging on the door. There was no choice: he could not hide or flee unseen, he had to open it. The visitors were friends of the people normally inhabiting the hut. Listening to Ormay's tale, they gave him food and a detailed explanation of how to get to the border safely through the labyrinthine marshland of rivulets, canals, stagnant water and the reed beds of Lake Fertő, where only those in the know could find their way. Even the border was peculiarly drawn; one segment of it protruded deep into Austria, and Ormay had to take care not to cross it twice, coming back into Hungary. After two days strenuous walking he successfully reached Austria. To complete the story, and to record that his inventiveness had indeed not deserted him in London, it is worth recounting his escapade in the Lancaster Gate Hotel. Ormay flew in with the first of the chartered aircraft bringing Hungarian refugee students to Britain and the British Council for Aid to Refugees put them up in the Lancaster Gate Hotel before transferring them to Oxford. Ormay woke up in the morning feeling very hungry but he had no notion what one was supposed to do in such an elegant place. His knowledge of English was practically non-existent, but thinking hard, the word "breakfast" came into his mind. Picking up the telephone, he half-heartedly placed an order by shouting the magic word into it. He was amazed when few minutes later the door opened and a trolley loaded with a full English breakfast, was wheeled in.[19]

It is estimated that over 200,000 refugees left Hungary, among them between 7000 and 8000 university students. Today, listening to their stories, their first acts in the West seem almost comical, though, knowing the background, completely understandable. With their few Austrian Schillings they went out to buy an illustrated magazine, a bunch of bananas and a bottle of coca-cola. Western magazines were not allowed across the Iron Curtain, where the papers were drab and contained only propaganda. Everyone imagined that magazines published abroad were immensely exciting and the true purveyors of Western style living and culture. Bananas were also not available in Hungary—heaven knows why.

[19] Interview with Antal Ormay. 25 Nov. 2004.