

„Righteous of the Region”

***Research work done by Béla Nóvé
in the Open Society Archives, Budapest
September-October 2010***

– Excerpts of a final report –

As of late July 2010 my research project was generously chosen to be supported by Visegrad Scholarship at Open Society Archives Budapest as a two-month stipend starting on September 1, 2010 and ending by November 1, 2010.

I have chosen five major refugee crises of the region in the period of 1939-1989 to be researched and compared. These are

- Refugees from Poland found asylum in Hungary from 1939-1945;*
- 1944-45 Holocaust survivals saved by non-Jewish persons;*
- 1956 Hungarian emigrants received by Austria and the „free world”*
- 1980’s Romanian refugees arrived to Hungary and the West*
- 1989 GDR citizens refused to return to East Germany and were helped by Hungarian civilians until they were permitted to leave for the BRD via Austria.*

With the valuable help I received from my main consultant András Mink and other staff members of the OSA (Miklós Tamási, Anikó Kövecsi, Csaba Szilágyi, Robert Parnica, Örs Tari, etc.) as well as other Budapest research places (1956 Research Institute, State Security Archives, National Széchényi Library, MTA KKI) I have managed to make significant progress in both the critical revision of the socio-political background of each refugee crises mentioned above and in finding authentic testimonies of different rescue cases.

Before the end of my research period on 27th October I was asked to hold a presentation in the Open Society Archives, which was commented by the audience and followed by a number of further informal discussions. This helped me a lot to make the main preferences more clear, and to decide on the optimal use of the sources and methods. Now I am happy to say that I am quite close to complete my research and text work and planning to publish a series of case studies in both English and Hungarian language periodicals by early 2011.

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1) Polish refugees in Hungary 1939-1945

Every legend of history seems different from a closer look as it is reflected by personal documents and memoirs remained. The often referred episode of the Polish-Hungarian friendship of Fall 1939 is not an exception to this either.

True, there was a demonstrative compassion and helpfulness displayed towards the persecuted Poles by the otherwise German ally Hungary. However, the overall reception was rather an ambivalent one. Slovak village-dwellers along the Polish border (of the recaptured Hungarian territories!) provided asylum for the Poles nevertheless enthusiastically than most of the Hungarian civilians, church or municipal leaders. In the meantime some pro German Hungarian army officers as commanders of the refugee camps treated Polish soldiers in some places quite rudely and with utmost hostility.

How extensive this refugee flood was? It's difficult to tell, because of the „leaking” migration, i. e. the permanent coming and leaving of the Poles. (The army staff was systematically smuggled out of Hungary first to France and then on to Palestine.) There are different estimations: that of the Hungarian government offices, the Polish statistics and the secret informations of the Gestapo. All in all some 50,000 military men and cca 15,000 civilians included 3-4,000 Polish Jews found asylum in Hungary. The later group was a special one settled in and around the city of Vác mostly, and enjoined the active help of the Hungarian Jewish organization. (Schools, medical and social care, etc)

There were in fact at least two massive campaigns of persecution: the one in Autumn of 1939 at the outbreak of WW 2, and the other one in 1944 by the German occupation of Hungary by the end of War. Those who managed to survive were mostly hidden and supported by Hungarian families, priests, monks, nuns, and some resistance rescue forces. However, the strongest motivation was that of the many hundreds of love liaisons and the dozens of Polish-Hungarian mixed marriages especially in and close to the city of Esztergom, where one of the largest community of Polish soldiers could survive till the end of the war enjoying the protection of both Mayor Etter and Cardinal-Prince Serédy. My case study to be written will show this special solidarity network in action through some personal memories and documents of 3 or 4 couples.

Consultants: *Imre Molnár (Hung Embassy, Warsaw) Károly Kapronczay (Miczkiewicz Society, Budapest), Anna Mazurkiewicz (Gdansk University)*

Further researches: *secondary literature published + unpublished personal diaries, memoirs and other documents to be collected*

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3) The Orphans of a Revolution: The fate of those underage, who in late 1956 fled Hungary, and then returned

Among the files of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty Media Collection I found an article published in Dagens Nyheter, the Swedish liberal daily, on April 18, 1957 with the hand written note of RFE/RL censor: „Not for Broadcast!” The title is „4,000 children – unwelcomed refugees” and its first lines are probably the best setting of the next grave subject: the refugee crisis of 1956:

„At least 15 per cent of the 175,000 Hungarians who have fled to Austria were minors. Most of them came with their parents, and as families had priority, they were soon recieved by different countries [actually 36 of them! - BN]. But the 4,000 young who came without parents only met closed doors in the whole of the free world. Nobody wants to take the responsibility for them and for their future. In the meantime one has long forgotten it was these young people – most of them 15 to 18 years old – who five months ago, were much admired by the anti-communist countries. Nobody thinks about that it was these youth who carried the Hungarian revolution, that they were the first to storm ammunition supplies, took the arms, and with their Molotov-cocktails picked the uneven fight against Russian tanks. Today they are no longer heroes. Today they are problem.”

By further research the „problem” proved to be even more alarming. Not only because noone has ever decently researched what to these „children of the revolution” really happened – even the confident files of the family-search service of the Hungarian Red Cross were confiscated by the secret police in 1962! – but also because these underage emmigrants (and then remmigrants) soon became the number one target of cold war propaganda fights from all sides. The Kádár regime wanted to get them back by all means promising amnesty for those who return and broadcasting heartbraking messages to them daily, Vice-President Nixon shook hand with many of them when visiting refugee camps in Austria a few days before Christmas 1956, but the West all in all remained rather reluctant to receive the „orphans of the revolution”. Thus many fled illegally further from Austrian camps and joined the French Foreign Legion or the US Army in West Germany, but also many returned home, fallen victim of tightening terror, either being imprisoned or made a spy – sometimes both. With the help of devoted experts I have collected a number of personal stories and documents about those forgotten heroes and antiheroes in order to publish a highly exciting case study.

Consultants: András Mink (OSA), János Rainer, Adrienne Molnár, Zsuzsanna Körösi, László Eörsi, Gyula Kozák (1956 Research Institute, Oral History Archives)

Further researches: 1956 Research Institute, Oral History Archives, ÁBTL, National State Security Archive, Budapest

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5) „Hide a German!” The East German refugee crisis in Hungary, August-September 1989

And there came the sudden and dramatic flood of some 50,000 East German refugees who refused to return to the GDR, and tried desperately by all means to get to West Germany via Hungary and Austria. This seemed to make the Romanian human right and refugee case „second rate news” for six weeks.

The picturesque sensations of the „Paneuropean Picknick” at the Austrian-Hungarian border, the „rescue action” of the 108 GDR citizens who seized the Embassy of FRG in Budapest, and finally the midnight border-opening of 09.11.89 were all broadcasted live worldwide, and somewhat overshadowed the personal involvements of this mass movements.

My aim is to refresh the memory of these by using diverse documents and means, such as personal interviews, media clippings, documentary films and secret reports prepared by the Stasi and the Hungarian State Security Corps. (Even today a few people know only how closely and „fraternally” these organisations collaborated with each other until as late as mid October 1989!) It would also be important to remind the fact, that there were not just jammed full refugee camps, and busy volunteers of the Maltese Cross and the Red Cross, but also hundreds of Hungarian families providing shelter for long weeks or months especially for those East German families arrived with children or the ones with no valid passports for Hungary. (That’s why the slightly ironic proverb „Hide a German!” was invented by Miklós Haraszti, a wellknown member of the that time Hungarian democratic opposition.) And there were of course victims also among the escapes, such as Kurt Werner Schultz (36) from Weimar, who was shot dead over the border on Austrian territory or those estimated at least 300 who tried to swim across the river Danube, not having valid passports, and died.

I think it is nevertheless important to publish a critically revisited overall documentation after more than 20 years. I have already edited a nearly 40 page one included a cronology of events, a bibliography with both Hungarian and German titles, a press repertory of 1989-2009, and a filmography. (See Appendix 2.) I want to make it more complete by adding photos and German translations, where needed.

Consultants: Peter Grimm (Berlin), György Dalos (Berlin-Budapest) Miklós Tamási (OSA, Budapest)

Further researches: Birthler Behörde, Berlin; ABTL, Budapest

Finally let me thank you and all my consultants once again this great chance for a fruitful and highly intensive research work. I hope my publications will prove soon that I was worthy to your confidence and generosity.