

Life In Transit

Following the defeat of the Hungarian Revolution of October and November 1956, 200,000 people — 2% of the state's population — fled their homeland. The vast majority sought asylum in Austria, where within a six week period, 140,000 people crossed the border. Despite Austria's warm welcome, it could not absorb so many refugees. The processing and resettlement of refugees took weeks... sometimes longer. In the meantime, life went on.

À la suite de l'écrasement de la Révolution hongroise d'octobre et novembre 1956, 200 000 personnes ont quitté le pays, soit deux pour cent de la population de la Hongrie. Sur une période de six semaines, 140 000 personnes ont trouvé refuge en Autriche. Les autrichiens ont accueilli ces réfugiés à bras ouverts. Cependant, le nombre augmentant de jour en jour rendait leur administration et l'hébergement de plus en plus longue et difficile.



Looking Back for the Last Time

After giving him the last of our money, a Hungarian border guard showed us where the boat was. We rowed across to Austria and as promised, pushed the boat back to the Hungarian side. The moment we did so, we realized we were cutting ourselves off from our homeland. By then it was dark and we started to cross a field. A strange feeling took over me. Joyous, yet at the same time fearful – the feeling of no turning back. As long as I live I will never forget this moment. I drew this picture November 19th, 1956 in a refugee camp in Vienna.

— Imre Táry

L'histoire des péripéties racontées par M. Imre Tary est aussi l'histoire de milliers d'autres réfugiés. « C'est seulement lorsque j'ai traversé la frontière que j'ai réalisé vraiment que je venais de me séparer, de me couper de mon pays natal. Des émotions étranges se sont emparées de moi – joie et tristesse en même temps ainsi qu'une prise de conscience du fait qu'il n'y avait plus de retour ... » M. Imre Tary a esquissé le dessin ci-dessus, à Vienne, le 19 novembre 1956.



Their spirit still unbroken, Hungarian families take the last course that remains open to them. The road leads to the Austrian border and to the Western world, to respite and refuge but on alien land.

November 13th, 1956:
“First Hungarian Refugees Reach Canada Monday”

November 23rd, 1956: The largest movement of refugees into Austria took place on this single day, 8,537 Hungarians entered Austria.

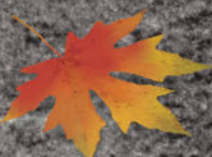


Photo by Michael Descamps for Paris Match, "Hungary's Fight for Freedom" p.96-67, LIFE special edition, 1956.



Refugee Camps

Laszlo de Roth, a 15 year old orphan, took this flashlight with him on his journey out of Hungary. The flashlight was his only real possession; he had saved money from a summer job to buy it.

Laszlo took part in the Revolution with a group of teen-agers who went from apartment block to apartment block in Budapest requesting empty wine bottles. These were used to make Molotov cocktails.



Laszlo de Roth, 1956



Laszlo de Roth, 2006
Professor, School of
Veterinary Science,
University of Montreal



Laszlo était un garçon de 15 ans lorsqu'il a traversé la frontière austro-hongroise et sa seule possession était cette lampe de poche. Comme beaucoup d'autres jeunes de son âge, lui aussi a participé à la Révolution hongroise. « Dans le 7e arrondissement de Budapest, j'allais avec mes copains d'un bloc appartement à l'autre. Au milieu de la cour intérieure, je criais de toutes mes forces : Le conseil révolutionnaire demande aux résidents de bien vouloir remettre leurs bouteilles vides ! Nous les ramassons ! Tout le monde savait alors que c'était pour fabriquer des cocktails Molotov. Lorsque les Soviétiques ont écrasé la révolution et ont de nouveau occupé Budapest, mes copains m'ont conseillé de quitter le pays car beaucoup de personnes m'avaient vu et auraient pu témoigner contre moi. » Laszlo est donc arrivé seul au Canada en janvier 1957.

“My mother, sister and I were stationed in Wels, Austria for nearly 4 months. The days as I recollect were never dull. One time, I accompanied my mother to her job at a garden centre. To my surprise I was even paid for my work. I spent my money on a cap gun and thus became the one Hungarian boy, who, beside the Austrian boys, had a ‘real’ gun to shoot in our wild adventurous games.”



“We attended a makeshift school in the camp. It was peculiar in that the students were always changing – some coming and others leaving. We spent lots of time on our own, learning English from a dictionary which was provided to us in a relief package.”

— János Pintér



With the effective closing of the border between Austria and Hungary in early 1957, Yugoslavia became increasingly important as a transit country for escape.

Au début de 1957, lorsque la frontière austro-hongroise a été fermée de nouveau, la Yougoslavie est devenue le pays vers lequel les réfugiés se dirigeaient. Cependant, malgré la fermeture de la frontière vers l'Autriche, en janvier et février 1957, plusieurs personnes ont quand même tenté cette traversée dangereuse.

“There weren't enough dishes to go around, so I had to eat my lentil soup from a can. I ate all my meals from that can. It was an awful camp.”

— Lisa Golemme

Lisa Golemme se souvient encore de ses jours passés dans le camp des réfugiés en Yougoslavie. « Nous n'avions pas de plats ni de vaisselle, nous mangions la soupe aux lentilles à même la cannette. On devait utiliser la même cannette pour tous nos repas. Nous vivions dans des conditions difficiles. »



Between October 1956 and June 1960, 19,880 Hungarian refugees crossed the border to Yugoslavia. During that same period, 2,700 of them were repatriated, the rest, except for 500 left for other countries. Canada took about 10% of the total: 1,765.

November 16th, 1956: First Hungarian refugees reach Canada: Mining Engineer Karl Marton and family.
— Globe and Mail



Peter I. Hidas, Canada and the Hungarian Refugee Movement of 1956-57. (Toronto: manuscript, 2006)

Photos of Laszlo de Roth provided by Laszlo de Roth, School of Veterinary Science, University of Montreal.



Oranges and Chocolate

Shortly after the camps were set up, one Canadian Red Cross official said: “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.” One interviewee, who was only fourteen years old at the time, recalled the 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 all the time throughout the camp. According to the interviewee, everyone was thoroughly sick of oranges and chocolate.

Un officier volontaire de la Croix-Rouge disait : « Les meilleurs remèdes pour les réfugiés sont les oranges et le chocolat ! La majorité des jeunes de moins de 14 ans n’ont encore jamais mangé d’oranges ou de chocolat. »



In order that Austria might continue at least temporarily to accommodate the continuing flow of refugees, it was imperative that states of secondary asylum or permanent resettlement be found quickly. The United Kingdom agreed to accept several thousand refugees during November; by mid-December its immigration teams had granted 7,500 entry visas. Smaller numbers of refugees left Austria for Sweden, Switzerland, France and the Netherlands, and Federal German Republic during the latter weeks of 1956.

Afin d’assurer l’administration et l’hébergement des réfugiés par les autorités et la population de l’Autriche, il fallait que d’autres pays s’ouvrent aux réfugiés hongrois qui continuaient d’affluer vers celle-ci. C’est ainsi que le Royaume-Uni a accepté d’accueillir plusieurs milliers de réfugiés et a émis plus de 7 500 visas en novembre et décembre 1956. Pendant cette même période, les autres pays d’Europe tels que l’Allemagne de l’Ouest, la France, les Pays-Bas, la Suède et la Suisse ont aussi émis des visas aux réfugiés.



The international agencies responsible for assisting refugees were the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Les organismes qui sont intervenus pour assurer un service d’aide aux réfugiés étaient des responsables de l’agence intergouvernementale des migrations en Europe et de l’agence de secours et d’aide aux réfugiés des Nations Unies.



While waiting to depart for Canada in Wales

“Everything was strange, mostly the language, but being fairly young, we were optimistic and had some fun besides worrying about our future. One day we thought we’d speed up our departure and decided to build a bridge to Canada. We collected rocks and placed them in the water, but then the tide came in and – amid lots of laughter – we were forced to give up the project.” We finally left Wales April 19th, 1957.

— János and Éva Hayek,
Laszlo Szakaly



December 12th, 1956:
Globe and Mail headline:
“Up to 3,000 a Day: Huge
Refugee Flow continues”

December 31st, 1956: New Year’s Eve message broadcast by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation:
L.B. Pearson admitted: “One thing in the record of 1956 is clear. When the free governments failed to work together we lost ground in our search for peace and stability and progress.”



Peter I. Hidas, Canada and the Hungarian Refugee Movement of 1956-57. (Toronto: manuscript, 2006)

Susan M. Papp, “Flight and Settlement,” Polyphony: the Bulletin of the Multicultural History Society of Ontario, Hungarians in Ontario, 1979-80, Vol. 2, Nos. 2-3.

Photo by George Schroeder, Photomedia Productions.