

## **The Hungarian community in France in 1956: emigration, perception, reactions**

*Magyarok közössége Franciaországban 1956-ban: emigráció, attitűdök, reakciók*

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### **Introduction**

After the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, a large number of Hungarians decided to leave the country and emigrated to Western countries. The integration of migrants into a host society creates questions. However, in this particular case the concept of “minority” is completely missing from the French Constitution. According this Constitution as of 1958, “France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social republic. It shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion”. For this reason, this paper cannot speak about “minority” in France, but rather only about a “community” of immigrants to France and their descents living in this country.

The focus will be on Hungarian migrants who arrived in 1956 as a direct consequence of the historical events. Trying to understand the reasons which lead them to settle in France, the way they were perceived by the host population, and the way they perceived themselves is important. First certain findings on historical waves of Hungarian emigration in France will be summarized. Next, the year of 1956 will be highlighted in the light of certain migration along with focusing on the reaction of the general public and the support given to these refugees. And finally, this paper will reflect on the status and self-definition of '56 Hungarian emigrants to France in focusing on issues of self- and national identity.

### **Historical background of Hungarian immigration in France**

The first wave of emigration from Hungarian lands took place at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The concentration of land property was in the hands of the aristocracy and created a chronic state of agrarian unemployment, which in turn, forced some 1.2 million people to leave for Canada and USA. Between the two World Wars, the “white terror” (Horthy regime) combined with the economic crisis led to new waves of departures. The emigrants were mainly communists, social-democrats and radicals, but also included workers accused to have supported the revolutions, but also included landless peasants, intellectuals, and the younger generation without any hopes for the future. According to the Census of 1931, close to 19,000 Hungarians were enumerated

in France, in contrast to only 630 in 1921. The third migratory flow followed shortly after the destitution of Admiral Horthy, during the war and rise of the Popular Republic of Hungary. That time, the vast majority of emigrants were left-wing politicians and intellectuals. In 1936, the French Immigration Office (Seine) registered 5,737 Hungarians. By the end of 1944, a new wave of Hungarian migrants arrived to France, but entirely different than the former migrants. They were mainly Nazi military people, so called “Combattants hongrois”, directed by Farkas. At the same time, another group constituted by the Hungarian Catholic and Protestant Missions also came. The fourth wave of Hungarian immigration occurred in France from 1956-1957, which will be the focus.

According to estimates of the Hungarian Catholic Mission, the emigration of ethnic Hungarians to France in 1956 was about 30,000 persons, which some say is underestimated. In the beginning, the immigrants spread unevenly across the country, with a relatively strong concentration in the Ile de France region. The size of the Hungarian immigrant community has since decreased both in this particular region and elsewhere.

It is a well know that in 1956 and earlier the Hungarian emigration had its strongest roots in resistance to political regimes ruling their home country, and it has been always characterized by a strong presence of artists and intellectuals, and they became famous as a “socially indivisible group”.

### **The year 1956 and after**

Shortly after the Soviet tanks crashed the Revolution, in 1956, approximately 9,000 Hungarians arrived to France, 4,000 of whom were asking for transit to move on to other countries: 2,000 to Canada, 1,000 to the USA, and another 1,000 to Australia. At the time being, charity organizations such as Cimade or the Red Cross were responsible and cared for the refugees, first settling them in refugee camps (barracks), and then, finding jobs for those who wanted to stay. Progressively the priority was given to those who were willing to stay in France, which was between 700 and 800 monthly, including late arrivals in 1957. The immigrants were mainly younger men, between the ages of 16 and 30. About three quarters of the refugees were manual (industrial) workers, with the rest being professionals (engineers, professors, nurses, and many students). Testimonies collected by Antoine Marès show the welcoming of Hungarian immigrants was due more to their status of being refugees rather than their nationality itself. Moreover, they were regarded and sympathized as “legitimate victims”. On the other hand, they were perceived as readily-employable workforce. Only a few months after the first arrivals 2,000 Hungarians were already employed, 1,400 left for Canada, and 3,600 stayed in reception centres. The social services did not provide any financial help (cash) to Hungarian refugees. Instead, they were given legal advice on how to settle, and free language courses for two months fostering their integration as soon as possible.

They were strongly advised not to regard their status as a “safe haven”, but rather to build up their own ways of integration into the French society. Most of them settled in the Ile de France. The strong concentration in this area could be explained by the presence of the public administration dealing with migration issues, such the OFPRA, Ministry of Interior, Foreign Embassies) but also by two other factors: better opportunities for employment compared to any other region, and the existing Hungarian community as a supportive network created by earlier migrants, are two other factors that could have caused a strong concentration.

According to G. Kecskés, the Hungarian revolution and its brutal crushing by the Soviet army had a particular impact on the French society. The summary of notes recorded by the prefects, and collected by the Ministry of Interior makes it evident that “during the month of November, ‘56 the public opinion revealed an unpredictable sensitiveness toward international affairs”. The matters in Algeria and the interior problems of the country were pushed into the background. For different reasons, stresses G. Kecskés, the Hungarian revolution echoed back the historic memory of the Resistance, the revolutionary traditions in France, and the brutality of the Soviet repression which stirred up deep-seated emotions and solidarity with the victims. According to Professor Bernard Michel, no event since 1945 ever had such an impact in the French opinion. Not only intellectuals, but all social classes were impacted. The moral conscience was stronger than the reflexes of group or class. In general, neither the intellectuals, students, nor the working class were interested in the official reactions of the political elite, and they were not concerned with the opinion and public release of the French Communist party (PCF). This reaction can be explained by two main factors. On one hand, it was solidarity towards Hungary and Hungarians, and on the other, it was the indignation towards the action of USSR and the PCF, which approved the aggression. The deep compassion for the Hungarians was conveyed from the beginning by a full series of spontaneous voluntary actions, such as immediate help given to the victims by sending cash, clothes, organizing blood drives, as well as other provisions and food supplies. The newspaper *La Croix* relates on November 3<sup>rd</sup> of 1956 the momentum of solidarity of the inhabitants of Strasbourg who, within a few hours, flooded en masse to the City Hall with donations for Hungary following an appeal on the radio station, Europe 1. After the Soviet military intervention of November 4<sup>th</sup>, the sympathy of the French population also was expressed by numerous initiatives in favour of the refugees. Clothes and food were collected and distributed. According to an article by Michel Legris, published in *Le Monde* dated December 5<sup>th</sup> on the situation of Hungarian refugees, “spontaneous offers of jobs, accommodation and adoption -for the children” poured in. The letter of Odile Levesque, a young girl from the countryside, to the President of the Republic, Rene Coty, shows the general feeling: “In our village, we would like to receive Hungarians. Could you send some to us? We filled four cars of clothes, food cans and we collected a lot of money for them.” The most spectacular event made in that sense surely was the “national day in favour of

the Hungarian population” held on November 18<sup>th</sup>, carefully organized by the Ministry of the Interior.

In spite of the undeniable intensity of these events, the effects were rather short-lived, and the “martyred Hungary” disappeared from the pages of the daily newspapers rather quickly. One could wonder whether the instrumentation of these events was a demonstration of propaganda from the French government or something else (Kecskés).

### **Complexity of refugee status**

The exact causes of these migrations are left to speculation. According to Stephane Dufoix, it is possible to classify the reasons of emigration in a few, rather simple categories: (1) willingness to find more freedom, (2) escaping poverty, (3) fear of an arrest, (4) refusal to bear the communist system longer. The questions, left unanswered are whether or not it is possible to classify on the basis of these categories to what extent emigrations were economic or political.

The case of Pierre Kende, a Hungarian journalist, is significant. Partial to the ideas of Imre Nagy since 1953, he wrote in the daily newspaper of the Communist party, Szabad Nep. With friends, he created a “pro-Nagy” newspaper, called Magyar Szabadsag. Forbidden after the Soviet intervention, it was later renamed Oktober 23, symbolizing the resistance. He decided to leave Hungary after the first arrests of people in charge of its distribution. He considers the fear of being arrested for political reasons and threat to his life the first reason of his exile. In reality there was a secondary reason, which was seeing the ending of his career as a political activist. To quote how he explains this: “... the reformist movement was also a failure, first because it obtained nothing except from a revolution. ... I left Hungary with the idea that I had to begin a new life. I could not do it in Hungary because of my situation as an ex-member of the Resistance.” This willingness for change, doing something else has to be correlated to the physical pressure and threat. The younger migrants found the possibility of creating something new, possibly being a key factor making their integration in the French society much easier than one would expect. Surely, economic motives were also present. As Dufoix provides an example of many young people, who stated that poverty was the reason they left Hungary. School was important but it became too expensive. “Poverty. I used to read a lot, I was a good pupil and I preferred studying rather than cultivating the fields, but high school was too expensive for my parents. Man should eat first, and then he can make politics.

A summary note of the Bureau of the Hungarian Refugees (Magyar Menekultugyi Iroda) dated January 1957 gives very interesting indications of what was happening. At the time being, the Bureau was in charge of welcoming Hungarian migrants upon their arrival in France, helping them fill out different administrative forms. It has been documented that 30% of those who arrived in

1956 were real victims of the revolution, but 30-35% of applicants belonged the category of economic migrants. Surely, it cannot be said that they did not take an active part in the revolution, but the true purpose of their emigration was to join their families in Western countries. It would have been very hard to find any earlier Hungarian migrant, who would not have had some family members already living in some Western country. In this case, the revolution has been a unique opportunity to get out of Hungary.

Of course this can also be qualified, as shown by the testimony of Béla Takacs: "As for Hungarians, I didn't try to make any contacts with them. I have a friend in Paris, but I hardly know any other Hungarians at all. I don't keep in touch with the Hungarian Catholic mission either. I was afraid of making Hungarian contacts, I don't know why. When my first baby was born, I thought it would be correct to clarify my citizenship status. I acquired French citizenship simply out of consideration for my children. But I still have Hungarian citizenship to this day; I have not relinquished it and I don't think I ever will."

In order to know more about those Hungarians who decided to leave their country statistics can be studied. The figures given by the Hungarian Central Service of Statistics show that two thirds of the migrants come from the regions of Budapest, Győr-Sopron, Vas, Komárom and Veszprém. The migration was also favored by the geographical conditions, all these regions being near the Austrian border, which was opened by way of an exception. The two only Eastern cities with a significant emigration, Miskolc and Debrecen, could be explained by the fact that there was a strong revolutionary movement there. The migrants coming from Hungary in 1956 are a very heterogeneous population. The Renseignements Généraux (Secret Services) tried to make a quantification of the political population in February, 1956. Records on 12,497 Hungarians in France show that 8,020 of them were nationalists, 4,039 are refugees and 438 are stateless persons. Moreover this specifies that of those 12,497 persons, 5,500 persons (40%) were politically engaged; 1,500 were more or less in favor of the Communist regime and 4,000 were members of different anti-governmental associations, either as active members or sympathizers. Regardless of the mix in ideological background, it can be supposed that the vast majority of the refugees from 1956 have readily taken the role of mediation of their national cultures in France without being insensitive towards the majority culture.

There was still the remaining question: how to create a balance between the country (culture) of destination and the country (culture) of origin. As underlined by Roger Braun in 1958: "... there is the question that as whether these satellite countries once become free, would these refugees come back there? After a long absence, would they feel at home there? Countries now evolve so fast and men too. Would the liberated country have the same face before and after the cataclysm?". Béla Takács was confronted to this kind of hesitation: "I went home for the first time in 1978. I was in Belgrade with my

wife when I had the crazy idea that I ought to visit my mother. I went to the Hungarian Embassy where I ran into a Hungarian girl I knew, we'd been at high school together. I probably wouldn't have got home if I hadn't known someone there. As it was, I rushed off home to my mother's in Csongrád with a passport and a visa, in other words, not in secret. But on the way back I felt as if I was escaping again, I hadn't enjoyed it at all. Perhaps I was still afraid. Since then, I've been back to Hungary twice. I enjoyed myself so much this year that I've become homesick for the first time in my life." It is interesting to see how this situation and framework can explain the fact that they managed to integrate themselves in the French society without too many complications. Most of them found jobs or continued their studies and stayed in France afterwards.

### **Conclusion**

The 1956 refugees to France transformed the structure of the Hungarian community that existed before their arrival. The number of ethnocentric Hungarian immigrants multiplied themselves, and a kind of rather peculiar cultural distance has been created between the "earlier settled" and "newly arrived" groups. Evidently, the "newcomers" tended to mark down from the previous immigrants by creating their own associations and communities, including a Revolutionary Council (Conseil Revolutionnaire) in Strasbourg, an "Association of Fighters for Freedom (Association des Combattants de la Liberté) and the like, in continuing political actions. All these moves have broken the dynamic of integration of the central Europe immigrants, which existed before. It is particularly difficult to draw a homogeneous portrait of the Hungarian community in France. Yet the fact remains that virtually all Hungarian migrant groups have found their own ways to fit and integrate themselves in the French society, mainly thanks to the help and support provided by the host population. A large number of 1956 Hungarians immigrants became well-known writers, journalists, teachers and professionals, adding new values both to the French and Hungarian culture.

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