

# After the Uprising of 1956: Hungarian Students in Britain

— ANN KNEIF

[Editors intro here](#)

Much has been written during the last 50 years about the events leading up to and during the Hungarian Uprising of 1956. Less consideration has been given to the students who arrived in Britain as refugees. During the weeks following the Soviet intervention in Hungary around 25,000 people were killed and a further 2,000 executed. From the beginning of November 1956 thousands of Hungarian citizens were rounded up and deported to Russia for no other reason than that they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Some fearing for their lives but many using the opportunity to escape from an oppressive regime, around 200,000 Hungarians took the opportunity to flee the country. The majority crossed the border into Hungary's only neighbouring non-communist state, Austria. Among them were many students. The students in Hungary had been closely involved in the uprising. Many feared reprisals and felt themselves vulnerable if they should remain in Hungary.

The students at British universities were quick to lend support to their Hungarian counterparts. At first the idea was to equip a volunteer army to aid those fighting for Hungarian freedom.<sup>1</sup> On 8 November a march by 1,000 students protesting over Soviet intervention was held in London.<sup>2</sup> This was followed on subsequent days by other marches aimed at both calls for a volunteer fighting force and condemnation of Russia. Only when it became apparent that it would be impossible to send armed men to Hungary did the students turn to more practical matters. On 16 November 1956 *The Times* published a letter from three Oxford colleges drawing attention 'to a fund set up by junior members of Oxford University to provide scholarships ... for Hungarian refugee students'. On the same page a further letter from John Lockwood, Vice-Chancellor of the University of London, noted that plans were under way for universities to accept Hungarian students. A small group of university personnel, led by William Deakin, Warden of St Antony's College, Oxford, left for Austria on 15 November to assess the situation there, in what was described as a private university exercise.<sup>3</sup> In Austria the Austrian student organisation had sorted out students from among the refugees and taken them to special centres. From these students the British Council selected those wishing to study in Britain. Deakin and his colleagues then interviewed them.<sup>4</sup>

On 27 November a meeting took place of the Sub-Committee of the Vice-Chancellors, together with the World University Service (WUS) and the National Union of Students, to discuss the problems of Hungarian refugee students.<sup>5</sup> Aided by the British Embassy in Vienna, Deakin and his colleagues had selected 150 students thought suitable for studying at British universities. They were thereafter referred to in Government circles as 'the Deakin lot.'<sup>6</sup> However, it soon became apparent that not all of the 150 were suitable for university education and some would have to be placed in technical colleges or in employment. The WUS estimated that 15 percent of refugees to Britain were students. If this rate continued the country could expect 700 students to arrive.<sup>6</sup> The Vice-Chancellors' Committee sent the secretary of the London University Board to Austria for further selection, although he was to make it plain that there were not unlimited places in higher education. There was, for example, a large contingent of 40 teachers and around 550 students, who had arrived in Austria from a technical university in Sopron. The forestry branch, consisting of 30 teachers and 300 students, had sent letters to several countries, including Britain. They wanted to be accepted at a university en bloc and continue their studies in Hungary.<sup>7</sup> They would have more than filled the British quota but they were eventually accepted by Canada.

The Vice-Chancellors would have preferred to spread the Hungarian students over many universities but it was decided that it was more advantageous to keep them in groups for an intensive

London takes off its hat and waves to Hungarians refugees from their homeland, as they drive from Victoria Station, London after their overland journey from Austria.  
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course in English. The universities were to arrange the initial accommodation with financial help from the £10,000 allocated by the Lord Mayor's Fund, a public appeal to help refugees. The intention was to send the students on a six-month intensive English course, starting in January, in order to enable them to continue with their university education in October 1957, at the start of the new university year. During December they would be sent on an interim English course.<sup>8</sup>

The first planeload of 34 Hungarian students arrived from Austria on Monday 26 November. They were accommodated at the Lancaster Court Hotel until the 30 November, when they were moved to a reception centre at Oxford. The second plane, carrying 35, arrived on the 30 November. The students were taken to a reception centre at Tavistock Square, operated by the University of London.<sup>9</sup> One of the students in the second party, Imre, remembers arriving at Blackbushe Airport before being taken to Tavistock Square. One of his first memories of Britain was of being met by middle aged

ladies handing out cups of what he thought was coffee.

'And we got a coffee and we sipped at it and it took a great strength of self control not to spit it out because for us it was like drinking dish water. It was tea. We never drank tea with milk or didn't even know it existed with milk. The next day we discovered that you could put sugar in it, so we all put about six cubes of sugar in a cup of tea and then it became drinkable'<sup>10</sup>

On arrival in London Imre was present at a dinner for the students organised and attended by the Vice-Chancellor of London University. After a few days he was among a group sent to Leeds to study phonetics and basic English.<sup>11</sup> Others were sent to Birmingham, Oxford and London. It was hoped to allocate the students to universities for specific courses of study by mid-December. This was the case for Imre, who was offered a place at Reading University. He was able to spend the Christmas holidays with the family of an English student.

With the arrival of the first students, the Ministry of Education was pressing for a Hungarian speaker with knowledge of the Hungarian education system. Such a person would be able to help with sifting out those who were university material, students who could gain by full-time technical college education and those who were unsuited for further education. In general, the Hungarian universities had a good reputation and those interviewing the students were impressed by the quality. Nearly half were engineering students but there were also scientists, mathematicians, medical students and musicians.<sup>12</sup> Those rejected would be found employment as soon as they had a minimum of English. The others, after they had completed an intensive English course, would have a further assessment. There would be no attempt to make a final decision until then.<sup>13</sup> 'If a 'student' is not now genuinely a student but an inspiring industrial or land worker, he should on the whole get into industry or on to the land and work up from there (the possibilities of day release and sandwich courses will need to be

A party of Hungarians, hold aloft the 'freedom flag' on their arrival at Victoria Station, London after their journey overland from Austria.  
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His wounded hand in a sling, a Hungarian refugee has a meal on arrival at Blackbushe Airport, near Camberley, Surrey.  
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stressed to them).<sup>14</sup>

The 150 students were given special status. Because they did not come under the normal arrangements made by the British Council for Aid to Refugees (BCAR), they were not automatically eligible for Government relief. Initially it was the four university centres; Birmingham, Leeds, Oxford and London that had financial responsibility for maintaining the students during the few weeks of their basic English course, which would continue until the Christmas holiday.<sup>15</sup> The problem still to be resolved was financing the six month intensive English course after the Christmas break. Although by now the universities were committed to supporting the 150 students through university, they were not prepared to finance them through the intensive English course.<sup>16</sup> They were also not prepared to make any financial arrangements for students other than the 150, without some guarantee of meeting expenses. It was thought that about

350 other students, both university and technical college applicants, were among the refugees. The cost of educating them was estimated at £490,000.<sup>17</sup> Referring to the students over and above the initial 150, the Ministry of Education thought the students should be selected carefully. Only those who were academically promising and taking subjects 'in which this country is liable to have a pragmatic interest should be considered.'<sup>18</sup> However, refugees who already had a diploma, degree or professional qualifications would not be able to receive financial help to carry out research or take a higher degree.

It was becoming increasingly apparent that although not all the 150 students brought to Britain under the initial scheme would be suitable for university study, there were several hundred more refugee students in Austria who might be.<sup>19</sup> All Hungarian students were given a questionnaire to complete that had been organised by the WUS. They were asked basic questions about their qualifications,

how many semesters of study they had completed, their knowledge of English and whether they wished to continue with the same studies or change to something different.<sup>20</sup> The last point was particularly relevant as Hungarian universities had a quota system. Under the communist regime, priority for places at university was given to the working classes, craftsmen and peasant farmers. The intelligentsia often had to take courses they would not have chosen. Some were denied university education even if they had the relevant qualifications. Imre, whose parents were teachers, had wanted to study English but instead had to study Hungarian and Russian.

'You just simply had to go to the university because if you didn't you had to go to the army for three years and then you were treated there like animals. But on the other hand if you went to the university you studied, I think two hours a week theory and then after the first and second year you went to a camp for one month. Afterwards three months and you finished off as an officer. That's elitism for you.'<sup>21</sup>

By January, of the original 150 students, 103 had been accepted as suitable for university places. The most difficult students to place were those wishing to study medicine or dentistry. The remainder were put into the care of the WUS for screening for suitability in technical



colleges. A further 40 from those arriving from Austria through the normal channels had also been accepted for university study to replace those of the original 150 thought unsuitable. This still left many students who wished to pursue university courses. They, together with the technical college applicants, could be given no guarantee of remission of fees and maintenance grants.<sup>22</sup>

The WUS had been offered free places in several language schools and an appeal to 'adopt' a Hungarian student had met with some success.<sup>23</sup> Imre, for example, had been given a place in a private language school in Cambridge. He lived in halls of residence at St Catherine's.

The Ford Foundation, a charitable trust,<sup>24</sup> had originally offered half a million dollars, later increased to at least one million dollars, for the upkeep of Hungarian students in Western Europe. The Vice-Chancellors Committee had identified a further 80 students of university calibre and made an offer to the Ford Foundation. 'The universities will take all 80 and pay for half of them, if the Ford Foundation will pay for the other 40; they will take a further 60 beyond the 80 if Ford will pay all.'<sup>25</sup> In spite of the fact that the universities would be unable to support the additional 40 students, the Ministry of Education would be financially responsible in the end, whether they gained Ford Foundation money or not. They had nothing to lose by going along with the suggestion.<sup>26</sup> As a result, in

March 1957, the Ford Foundation made available sufficient funds for educating up to 75 Hungarian refugee students in British universities for a period of two years, with the provision that the students were recruited in Austria. However, it was becoming increasingly difficult to recruit suitable candidates in Austria. 'We ... have rejected more applicants than we have accepted ... and we are now getting very near the bottom of the barrel.'<sup>27</sup> It became a dilemma, as money from the Ford Foundation was advantageous as it earned the Government much needed dollars. Eventually the Ford Foundation approved a grant of 190,000 dollars to London University to be distributed among various universities, to be used for 2-year scholarships for Hungarian refugees.<sup>28</sup>

The British people took an immediate interest in the plight of Hungarian refugees arriving in Britain as can be seen in the response to the Lord Mayor's Fund. They were made welcome in Britain. However, the selected group of 150 students were given preferential treatment. They were sent on intensive courses in English, enabling them to attend university in the new academic year in October 1957. They received adequate funding to pay for their courses and upkeep. The students soon settled down to life in British universities. Some dropped out before completing their studies but the majority went on to gain degrees and even PhDs. Imre was one of those who failed to complete his degree, in his case due to illness. He went on to study mathematics part-time, eventually working as a system analyst in the computer industry. The Hungarian students indeed became an asset to the British economy.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> *The Times*, 8.11.1956
- <sup>2</sup> *The Times*, 9.11.1956
- <sup>3</sup> NA ED 121/875 Minutes on meeting of the sub-committee of the Vice-Chancellors, signed J. Roach, Ministry of Education, 28.11.1956
- <sup>4</sup> *The Times*, 2.1.1957
- <sup>5</sup> NA ED 121/875 Minutes, op.sit. 28.11.1956

- <sup>6</sup> NA UGC7/577 WUS interim report 28.11.1956
- <sup>7</sup> NA ED 121/874 letter to Treasury, 29.11.1956
- <sup>8</sup> NA ED 121/875 WUS working committee, 4.12.1956
- <sup>9</sup> NA UGC7/577 University of London, Note of arrangements for reception of Hungarian refugee students
- <sup>10</sup> Interview with Imre P.
- <sup>11</sup> Interview with Imre P.
- <sup>12</sup> *The Times*, 2.1.1957
- <sup>13</sup> NA UGC 7/577 Memorandum committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (undated)
- <sup>14</sup> NA ED 121/875 Memorandum 'Hungarian Students', Roach, 30.11.1956
- <sup>15</sup> NA UGC 7/577 op.cit.
- <sup>16</sup> NA ED 121/875 Home Office Memorandum, 17.12.1956
- <sup>17</sup> NA ED 121/875 'Hungarian Refugees', Home Office Memorandum, 12.12.1956
- <sup>18</sup> NA ED 121/875 letter Nenk, Ministry of Education, to Turnbull, Treasury, 21.12.1956
- <sup>19</sup> NA ED 121/875 letter Lockwood, Vice-Chancellor, University of London to Fleming, Ministry of Education, 5.12.1956
- <sup>20</sup> NA ED 121/875 WUS approximate transcript of the main questions in the WUS questionnaire for Hungarian student refugees, 7.12.1956
- <sup>21</sup> Interview with Imre P.
- <sup>22</sup> NA ED 121/875 Minutes Roach, 1.2.1957
- <sup>23</sup> NA ED 121/875 WUS report, 'Hungarian Refugee Students', 10.1.1957
- <sup>24</sup> One of the Ford Foundations aims was to: 'Strengthen, expand and improve educational facilities and methods to enable individuals more fully to realize their intellectual, civic, and spiritual potentialities; to promote greater equality of educational opportunity; and to conserve and increase knowledge and enrich our culture.', [www.fordfound.org](http://www.fordfound.org)
- <sup>25</sup> NA ED121/875 Memorandum, 'Hungarian Students, Roach, 1.2.1957
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> NA FO 371/127709 letter Heppel, British Embassy, Vienna, to Falla, Foreign Office, 22.3.1957.
- <sup>28</sup> *The Times*, 8.4.1957

Ann Kneif has a PhD in history from the University of Kent. The subject of her thesis was 'Directed to the Mines: the Bevin Boys, 1943-1948', which uses oral evidence to recount the life of those young men directed to the mines during the 2nd World War. Using in part oral testimony, she is now in the process of researching the experiences of the Hungarian refugees who fled to Britain in 1956 and also their place in British society.



Hungarian refugees are welcomed on their arrival in Kent November 1956 with real coffee.  
*Kent Messenger Group*