

Hungarian Refugee Students in Belgium after the Revolution of 1956: The Leuven Case

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Abstract: Students played a prominent role in the Hungarian revolution of 1956 and after its bloody suppression, many of them emigrated to the West from November of the same year to save their lives. This article presents the fate of a small Hungarian refugee community of the 1956 revolution, focusing especially on those students who arrived in Leuven, Belgium. Since the Catholic University of Leuven gave an outstanding opportunity to those refugee students who intended to pursue their already started studies in Belgium, it is not a coincidence that many have chosen Leuven deliberately. The present article discloses the different institutes and prominent persons who contributed considerably to the success of the refugee students.

Keywords: Hungarian revolution of 1956, refugee students, Leuven, *Collegium Hungaricum*

Introduction

When one mentions the year 1956 in Eastern Europe, many think of the Hungarian revolution which ended with a bloody suppression by the Soviet army. As a consequence, a great wave of Hungarian emigrants left the country, heading to one of the western countries. The elderly generations have numerous personal experiences with Hungarians who were integrated into the society of one of the western countries. Though the revolution and its consequences were well-known to many, the fate of refugees in their new societies started to interest Hungarian researchers only recently. This is, however, a natural process since any scientific research on the topic was forbidden until the collapse of the Iron Curtain. After 1990, the preserved sources documenting the Hungarian revolution had to be processed first, and only afterwards was it possible to start broader research on the so-called Hungarian refugee colonies in the West. In this article, the author focuses on a small group of Hungarian students who

arrived in Belgium, more precisely on those who eventually stayed in Leuven after the autumn of 1956. Of primary interest for the author is whether the different Belgian institutions and the society as a whole created an atmosphere of hope for the refugees and if yes, which institutions and prominent persons did contribute to this? How did the students who arrived earlier help each other? How much did the local initiatives contribute to facilitating the integration of the newcomers?

The refugees and Belgium

As it is widely known, barely one decade after the end of WW II, Hungarian students and workers launched a series of protests against Soviet-style communism. These protests were fuelled by both the methods and results of the new society. The prerequisite of implementing communism was the systematic destruction of traditional societal pillars, such as family and its old traditions, Christian denominations, and of whatever was associated with any type of religious beliefs. Different churches and people connected to these were, however, only one of the segments that communism tried to eliminate. Those who protested against the transformation of the society on communist principles were regularly terrorised. After the death of Stalin in 1953, signs of easing were perceivable, nevertheless, this was to be treated with high cautiousness: communism did not cease to exist. It only changed its method from an inhuman terror to a somewhat bearable but still dictatorial system. The relative relaxation of the regime on the one hand, and the constant pressure on the other, made the outbreak of strikes in Hungary possible.

In the summer of 1956, workers made clear that they were not satisfied with the communist system, and a strike broke out at the Rákosi Mátyás steel plant on 12 July.¹ At the University of Szeged, active resistance gave birth to growing protests in the autumn of 1956 which spread swiftly also to other major cities of the country, such as Debrecen, Miskolc and, of course, Budapest.² Active participants of the events did not realise when was it exactly that they crossed the hardly perceivable boundary between protest and revolution. The western powers did not interfere in the revolution, apart from the media campaign led by Radio Free Europe and the later humanitarian help of the US and other Western countries. At that time, England was busy with the

¹ Moritz Poellath, "Agents, Fascists and Provocateurs: Disinformation as an Instrument to Delegitimize Uprisings in Eastern Europe (1953, 1956, 1968) and Its Impact on the Politics of Memory," *Journal of Intelligence History*, 2021, 1–23.

² For a thorough account on the topic, see Jancsák Csaba, *A Magyar Egyetemisták és Főiskolások Szövetsége (1956) életinterjúk tükrében* (Szeged: Belvedere Meridionale, 2016).

Suez Crisis that broke out exactly in those days,³ and the US had clearly no interest in a new proxy war.⁴ Seeing the lack of interest on the part of the western world, the Soviet troops invaded Hungary and that ended the revolution at the beginning of November. The balance of the revolution was shocking: more than 2,700 persons were killed, about 25,000 were detained and 200,000 left the country.⁵ The proportion of the young was considerably high among the refugees since they played an active part in the revolution. Due to that 'exodus', Hungary lost an entire generation and the hope for any change for decades.

Hungarians participating actively in the revolution and as a consequence becoming refugees had two options for leaving the country. They could cross either the Austrian or the Yugoslavian border. Out of these two, the Yugoslavian border proved to be uncertain since the country, at a crossroads between East and West, was randomly switching its attitude from welcoming to rejecting refugees. The latter option meant sending them to death or long years of prison. Sometimes refugees tried to cross both borders.⁶ The numbers show clearly that refugees preferred the Austrian border at the expense of the Yugoslavian one: while there were about 180,000 Hungarians crossing the former, there were less than 20,000 crossing the latter.⁷ Though Austrian refugee camps were secure places, their capacities, however, were rapidly exceeded and the country was constantly sending calls for help to other Western countries. Several of them were ready to help whatever their motivation was. Belgium offered to accept a quota of 3,000 refugees which almost doubled at the end of 1957.⁸ Since many of the refugee Hungarians were students (whether high school or university students), some of them were consciously looking for possibilities to pursue their studies. Considering the opportunities offered by the Catholic University of Leuven (KU Leuven), many of refugee students came to Belgium with the hope of a possible continuation of their studies. Life, however, was not giving equal opportunities to all.

³ On the influence of the Suez Crisis to the revolution, see Peter G. Boyle, "The Hungarian Revolution and the Suez Crisis," *History* 90, no. 300 (2005): 550–565.

⁴ Steve Long, "The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and the Shortcomings of U.S. Strategy Towards Eastern Europe," *49th Parallel—An Interdisciplinary Journal of North American Studies* (22 July 2014).

⁵ Poellath, "Agents, Fascists and Provocateurs."

⁶ Csaba, *A Magyar Egyetemisták*, 118.

⁷ James P. Niessen, "Hungarian Refugees of 1956: From the Border to Austria, Camp Kilmer, and Elsewhere," *Hungarian Cultural Studies* 9 (11 October 2016): 123.

⁸ Marlies Segers, "Oost-Europese Vluchtelingen in België (1951–1982) Een Warm Onthaal Tijdens de Koude Oorlog?," (master's thesis, KU Leuven, Faculty of Arts, 2013), 33.

New country, new challenges: coal mines or studies?

The hope refugee students cherished was not unrealistic since Hungarian students were present at KU Leuven from the very beginning of the university's history throughout the modern period.⁹ In the 20th century as well, refugees were coming from Hungary in different waves. The first wave reached Belgium at the end of WW I: even though Belgium and Hungary were fighting on different sides in the war, Belgium (and the Netherlands) received thousands of Hungarian orphans and poor children for months.¹⁰ As a matter of course, there were children who never returned to Hungary and those who, after returning to Hungary from their Belgian 'holidays,' emigrated to Belgium as adults.¹¹ After WW II, and especially from 1949, there was already an official Hungarian student organisation officially established by students who were leaving Hungary in the aftermath of the communist takeover in the years 1945–49. This small student community took the name after the imprisoned Cardinal Primate of Hungary, Home Card. Mindszenty.¹² The members of the student organisation lived according to rules similar to those of an ashram or a kibbutz community, sharing all financial sources they managed to obtain. For instance, the student community, which had about 15–20 members, rented a house in the suburb of Leuven, more precisely on the Capucijnenvoer, no. 252, until 1951. They paid the rent first of all from the scholarships that a few of them received. Since the house was far from the city centre, they decided to move closer to the university and the city centre. As a result, they found a house in the neighbourhood of the main library (Blijde–Inkomststraat, no. 18). The community was led by different clergymen, such as Dominican, Franciscan, and Jesuit priests who left Hungary before the revolution. Jesuits were in a particularly difficult situation in Hungary since as a reaction to their clear refusal to cooperate with the communist regime, their novitiate in Szeged was closed in the autumn of 1948 and gradually, all their activities were forbidden. As a consequence, the elderly members of the province – in fact, those who were not imprisoned – started to help the emigration of those young Jesuits who were still in the process of their for-

⁹ On this topic, see István Muzslay, *Magyar diákok a Leuveni Katolikus Egyetemen: 1532–2000* (Budapest: Márton Áron, 2000). See also Éva Mária Fülöp, "Hungarian Students at Leuven (Catholic) University 1425– (1532)–1914," in *Universitas Budensis 1395–1995: International Conference for the History of Universities on the Occasion of the 600th Anniversary of the Foundation of the University of Buda*, ed. László Szögi (Budapest: Archiv der Loránd Eötvös Universität, 1997), 277–286.

¹⁰ For an outstanding account on the topic, see Vera Hajto, *Milk Sauce and Paprika: Migration, Childhood and Memories of the Interwar Belgian–Hungarian Child Relief Project* (Leuven: University Press, 2016).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 112–113.

¹² István, *Magyar diákok*, 16.

mation.¹³ This was also the motivation for the young Jesuit, István Muzslay and many others who were secretly leaving Hungary already from the early 1950s. Muzslay left the country in 1952 and went to the Netherlands to pursue his studies at the University of Nijmegen. Since in Eindhoven, near Leuven, there was a Jesuit centre and formation house, Muzslay moved to Leuven in 1954. Almost immediately upon his arrival, he was elected the head of the Hungarian students.¹⁴ During the revolution, the members of the Hungarian community followed the radio news day and night. Muzslay formulated a desperate call on the Belgian radio and television in the Netherlands to the western countries to protest against the invasion by the Soviet army. Since none of the Western countries showed reactions of support, there was no other task than to assist the refugees.

Of note, fellow students, the Catholic Church, and especially the Caritas Catholica in Belgium were helping these refugee students. First of all, the students of KU Leuven took their side exemplarily. In the days of the revolution, they organised protests both in Leuven and Brussels. Upon the request of the rector, on the 28th of October, a mass for the casualties of the revolution was celebrated in Leuven, attended by residents from all parts of the city. In the following days, as the events were going from bad to worse, the student protests escalated swiftly, and Belgian police had to intervene to prevent students from breaking into the Soviet Embassy in Brussels. As the Soviet troops invaded Hungary and refugees started to arrive in Leuven, local students organised different programs to give them a warm welcome. The knowledge of the language also played an important role at that point as in every society. Since the Catholic University of Leuven was bilingual until 1968, Hungarian refugee students had two possibilities, as they could study either in French or Dutch. Because there were only a few Hungarian–Dutch dictionaries and grammar handbooks at that time, the majority of the refugee students started their studies in French. To support students who tried to learn Dutch and pursue their studies among Flemish students, Father Muzslay with a couple of devoted Flemish friends set up a Hungarian–Dutch pocket dictionary.¹⁵

¹³ For a thorough account on the topic, see Ferenc Szabó, *Jésuites hongrois sous le pouvoir communiste*, trans. Thierry Monfils (Paris–Bruxelles: Éditions Jésuites, 2012).

¹⁴ Without the outbreak of the Hungarian revolution, his life might have continued in Indonesia at the University of Jakarta. Several Belgian Jesuits were serving there as professors and since Muzslay studied applied economics, a place was prepared for him too as future professor. The events on the autumn of 1956 have, nevertheless, totally changed these plans. See István Csontá, “Egy magyar sziget Nyugaton: A leuveni Mindszenty–kollégium megalapítása,” in *Muzslay István munkássága*, Szent Ignác Jezsuita Szakkollégium (Budapest: Magvető, 2017), 120–121.

¹⁵ *Hongaars–nederlands en nederlands–hongaars woordenboek* (Leuven: Hulp aan de hongaarse jeugd in ballingschap, 1957).

Refugees, upon their arrival to Belgium, first settled in one of the five refugee camps of the country: Spa, Verviers, Tongeren, Saives or Seilles.¹⁶ The first main goal was to find a job for those over 18 years. Inability to speak western languages, unfortunately, made the situation hard because after WW II, and especially after the communist takeover, only a few Hungarian schools had the privilege to teach one of the major western languages, i.e., French, English, or German. It should also be considered that four of the five refugee camps already mentioned were in the French-speaking parts of Belgium and only Tongeren was in the Flemish region. In these circumstances, the knowledge of German helped only those who arrived in Tongeren. French would have been a real advantage but there were not many refugees who were fluent in it, which is why manual labour was the only solution for the majority. The coal mines in the Charleroi basin and in Limburg were welcoming all those refugees who arrived in Belgium after WW II and wanted to work,¹⁷ therefore many Hungarians stayed there. As it turned out that companies recruit mine workers among the refugees, Muzslay tried to convince the authorities to let the young come to Leuven to pursue their studies at the KU Leuven even if they have already signed a work contract.¹⁸

Institutions helping reintegration

The period from November to December of 1956 was increasingly intensive for the Hungarian student community in Leuven. Muzslay was sending students from the community to refugee camps to help the Belgian authorities by translating for the newly arrived Hungarians. In this way, Muzslay tried to estimate the number of young refugees who were willing to continue their studies. Therefore, with the help of the local Hungarian students, Muzslay had a clear picture of eligible future students. Having this information at hand, Muzslay went to the rector of the KU Leuven to request his support. First of all, he asked for shelter for the refugees because the house that served as the home of the community of 15–20 Hungarian students, could not accommodate hundreds of

¹⁶ Laurent Waelkens, “Hungarian Students in Leuven in 1956,” KU Leuven, 2016, 3, <https://lirias.kuleuven.be/retrieve/512746>.

¹⁷ Though the time span of the article does not include the Hungarian refugees of the 1956 revolution, it gives an outstanding example of the challenges refugee workers faced: Frank Caestecker and Lieselotte Luyckx, “Hoe de Belgische mijnindustrie een nieuw thuis aan vluchtelingen–mijnwerkers aanbood (1947–1951),” *Revue belge de Philologie et d’Histoire* 97, no. 4 (2019): 1310–1315.

¹⁸ Interview with Muzslay István SJ conducted by the student community of the Collegium Hungaricum, Leuven, 22 April 2005.

refugees.¹⁹ Msgr Honoré van Wayenbergh, the rector of the KU Leuven in response to Muzslay's request, lent the *Collegium Falconis*, an old building used as a military hospital since the Napoleonic era, to be used for that purpose.²⁰ The refugee students renovated the rooms in the building before they moved in. The College they received from the rector was, nevertheless, much more than a simple place to stay: it was a dining and meeting place, a cultural centre, and for many, a fragment of home.

In a letter sent to the rector on 8 December 1956, Muzslay reported that there were already 63 students in Leuven. Their number would reach 110 by the summer of 1957. There were 164 Hungarian students registered for the academic year 1957–58 at KU Leuven.²¹ It is important to mention that not all the students found accommodation in the College – many of them were hosted by local families in the town and the villages nearby. Not only the rector but also the entire society was helping. In this regard, there are some prominent Belgians that should be mentioned, such as Pieter van Gestel, professor of law at the KU Leuven, Msgr Jozef Cardijn, the diocesan priest, founder and leader of the Young Christian Workers movement, or Msgr Gérard Philips, professor of theology and senator of the Belgian parliament. They, and many others, were actively involved in safeguarding refugee students. The name of Nathalie Fineau, adjunct secretary of Caritas Catholica in Belgium, also has to be mentioned. As a member of a noble family, she made a considerable contribution not only during the first period of the revolution by going personally to Hungary with the collected donations but she was also a sponsor of the later projects of Father Muzslay. And there were many such projects. First of all, when in October 1960 the KU Leuven asked Muzslay for the restitution of the *Collegium Falconis*, Hungarian students needed to find another secure place to move into. For this purpose, with the financial contribution of Fineau and other generous donors, Muzslay bought a house on the Blijde–Inkomststraat that he was renting before. At the beginning of the 1970s, he extended the house with a new wing in which he built not only new student rooms but also a new kitchen, chapel, and conference room. With her many contributions, Fineau deserved the title of the greatest benefactor of Hungarian refugees.²²

¹⁹ Archief van het Katholiek Documentatie Centrum, Leuven, 1956, box III, folder 4, Archives Kadoc – Archive of the Home Card. Mindszenty–Colegium Hungaricum Lovaniense.

²⁰ For a good summary of the history of the college, see Laurent Waelkens, Fred Stevens, and Joris Snaet, *The History of Leuven's Faculty of Law* (Brugge: die Keure, 2014).

²¹ István, *Magyar diákok*, 23.

²² This title was given to her by the Hungarian refugees, as commemorated by a marble plaque inside the building of the Brussels Hungarian House at the Rue de L'arbre Bénit, 123 in Ixelles.

Conclusion

The revolution of 1956 was a tragic event for Hungary not only because the Soviet army invaded the country and suppressed the revolution causing thousands of casualties but also because the events launched a new wave of refugees who left the country just a decade later than the refugees of WW II. Among Hungarians that fled to Belgium, there were many university students who would try to continue their studies in their new homeland. This would not have been possible without the invaluable help of the young Jesuit, István Muzslay and the Hungarian student community who were systematically building up a network of donors to facilitate the studies of the refugees of 1956. The Catholic University of Leuven as a whole, its rector, professors and students also held a prominent place in helping refugee students. The Belgian Caritas Catholica and its adjunct secretary, Nathalie Fineau, made a substantial contribution to meeting the needs of those students. The fact that Belgian society benefitted from accepting the Hungarian refugees of 1956 is unquestionable since numerous professors, medical doctors, engineers, and specialists in many fields, all rewarded their new country with their remarkable scientific careers after graduating. It turned out to be a win-win situation, but with their welcoming attitude, Belgians gave new hope and, consequently, also new life to an entire generation of Hungarians.

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