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Veterans of '56: I

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Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Rogers;

Two years ago this month the people of Hungary rose in a revolt that we have hailed as a struggle for freedom, and the Russians have called a counter-revolution. When it failed a large number of Hungarians - estimates fun from 175-200,000 - left the country. Most of them came across the Austrian border, which was for some days wide open and for a longer time in confusion. It seemed to me appropriate, two years after the event, to go in search of those of the 1956 refugees who remain in Austria, to see what they are doing and what is being done for them, and what they and the host country think of the matter now.

"The problem of the 1956 Hungarian refugees is almost solved," I was told by Herr Røhrholt, representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Vienna. "By next year it will be a matter of history."

Herr Røhrholt is a Dane. He saw something of Nazi concentration camps during the war, and for most of the years since has been working with refugees, first in the Middle East and now here in Central Europe. He is a man of deep sympathy - something not all those working with the refugees can claim honestly - but he is looking at the "big picture," the UN picture. "No other refugees," he said, "have done as well as these," and he gave me statistics on those who have been refugees since 1948 in the Middle East, since 1940-1945 here in Europe, and since 1918 in China.

Statistically he is right. Of the more than 175,000 who came out of Hungary in the winter of 1956, between 15-17,000 remain in Austria today. (The statistics are invariably vague, partially because not all refugees were registered, but primarily because different agencies have different definitions of "refugee", and some definitions are more exclusive than others; the UN definition is the most exclusive of all.) The United States have recently announced that they will take 3000 new Hungarians from Austria, and Canada has decided to accept 2000 more. So by next spring only 10-11,000 of these refugees should remain in Austria, a figure that this nation of seven million should absorb without real strain. About 8000 are still in camps today, including some of those who will go to America or Canada, and for those who remain permanently the United Nations High Commissioner has already started a building program of one thousand flats (for about 3000 people). Institutionally the end, as Herr Røhrholt said, is in sight.

But when one turns to individuals and to local situations, the problem is far from finished. When I quoted Herr Rohrholt's statement to representatives of the agencies working with the refugees, they were horrified. They are looking at the "little picture" and dealing with lives - if only 15,000 of them - still in jeopardy, still serious enough to bring an average of 40 cases a day to one of the smaller sectarian agencies working on "integration problems."

One of the problems that receive public attention is that of refugee-Austrian relations, a microcosmic replay of the old familiar nationalities problem in Central Europe. So the Viennese press gives spasmodic attention to the refugees, usually in the same spirit in which American newspapers in the late '40's loved headlines like: "Veteran murders wife," but never said: "Civilian slaughters mother." A recent spectacular murder of a prostitute in Klosterneuburg caused my neighbors to mutter "must have been a refugee" because there is a refugee camp in the town.

This is the inevitable decay of an original high-minded generosity.

After the Wine Gathering Festival at Klosterneuburg last week, I shared a table at a local inn with two workingclass families from Vienna, talkative after an afternoon of winetasting. They got on the subject of refugees.

"They get all sorts of special favors," one grumbled. "One lives near me and an agency arranged for a big loan to pay for his flat. So now he gets it for 150 Schillings a month, while I remain an untermieter (on a sub-lease) and must pay 700 for mine."

"Their healthy young men sit around in camps all day with all their needs cared for, and don't have to work," said another, "while we work hard all week and have nothing to show for it."

"They come here," said a third, inconsistently, "and take our jobs away from us."

We were eating in the shadow of a huge Caserne, built to house the soldiers of Kaiser Francis I just after the Napoleonic wars, where I had gone the day before to see several hundred of these refugees, crowded two or three families to a barrackroom. The story there was a little different: no work permits, infinite boredom and squalid surroundings leading to a camp "revolt" against a Camp Leader (an official from the Ministry of Interior) who is "a beast", complaints about the unwarranted hostility of the Austrians.

Two years ago Austria welcomed the refugees as heroes. "Austrian behavior at that time was particularly creditable," Herr Rohrholt had said, "more than Germany's toward the refugees at any time. This is partially because Austria is used to foreigners and does not easily resent them." But now the welcome has worn thin, resentment grows.

Frau Milos is one of the luckier refugees. Employed as secretary

to the Egyptian ambassador in Budapest before her escape in 1957, she is fluent in German, French and English as well as Magyar, and so got a job as an integration counselor with one of the American voluntary organizations working with the escapees. This position enables her to be more objective;

"The fault is on both sides. We came here having abandoned everything for the sake of freedom and a chance at a better life." (Her own ideal involves a flat where she can be reunited with her husband and her son, the hope of owning a car in a few years, and a few nice clothes.) "Then the Austrians resent what little we are given to help us achieve this. The people in camps wanted work, but they could not get the permits. So they had nothing to do but lie around all day and play cards all night. After a while they like this and no longer want to work. They are used to this life. But it is boring and it leads to trouble. There was in the beginning perhaps ten percent of the refugees who were no good anyway; this was inevitable."

When you open the prison doors in any revolution, I recalled, it is not only the political prisoners who come out. The murderers come too, and they are generally the first to run across the border. In this case, I heard from one who was at Andau and should know, the first were in fact the AVO men, the Communist secret police, during the early days when it appeared the revolution might succeed. Not all of them went back afterward.

But murderers and AVO men were only a tiny part of the flood. They came, the "heroes of Budapest", and were hailed with romantic and blind enthusiasm, showered with gifts and flattery by Austria and all the nations of the West. Nothing was too good for them. Very few were actual "freedom fighters", although all claimed this title later. Most were men and women with various personal reasons to fear a revived Stalinist regime, or people in search of better economic opportunities or chafing under Communist restrictions, and many were young people vaguely discontented and in search of adventure, for whom the Golden West portrayed by Radio Free Europe and their own imaginations had become the place where the blue begins.

Tens of thousands of them were whisked overseas with a speed that must have bewildered the "old refugees", many of whom had already lingered in other camps for over ten years and are still there. But thousands of the Hungarians remained, and the Austrians cared for them, with international help, in a way thoroughly creditable to so small a country.

Then came the day when the Hungarian and his host began to look at one another with more critical eyes. On the day that an overworked, irritable Austrian camp leader said to a Hungarian; "What now do you want? Do you think we are a charity organization?" or a Hungarian called an Austrian policeman "Cowardly Russian stooge!" the honeymoon was over. Trouble was born of the refugees' optimistic naivete about the free world and its opportunities, and of the Austrians' irritation at the nothing the refugees brought with them and at their great expectations.

"In Hungary they had nothing, but they did not work much either.

They knew that we got better pay, but did not know that we must often work harder," said one counselor. The illusion persists: if Austria is undeniably poor, the refugee dreams of Switzerland or the United States, those lands of undeniable wealth.

Then came the immigration commissions from the United States and the other overseas nations, "who, they heard, had places for a million people, and they mustered the people, who now were 'on the other side' (of the Iron Curtain), as a merchant musters his wares. They were asked whether they had relatives in the country of immigration or whether - something else! - they had ever had tuberculosis. The answer of one Hungarian demonstrated the tragic problem of emigration, as it still is today, two years later: 'In Budapest men also fought for freedom who had no relatives overseas, and also men with tuberculosis scars...'"

Austria was, perforce, left with the old, the sick, the unemployable, the politically dubious. Left with them in camps, where the Hungarians found camplife in many ways as restrictive, collectivized and poor as the life they had fled.

Klosterneuburg is, I am told, the worst of the camps. The old Caserne was used by the Russians during the occupation, as were most of the buildings in Lower Austria now housing refugees. The Red Army scratched the dedication to Kaiser Francis off the entranceway. Inside they scratched far more, and the place, when the Hungarians arrived in 1956, was almost uninhabitable. Improvements have been made. The plumbing now works, and some of the passageways have actually been painted in the last month. (It is amazing what fresh paint in the hallway can do to brighten one's whole outlook in such a place.) But in the courtyard all is mud, and a pig was being slaughtered noisily while I was there. At Klosterneuburg there are police on guard at the gate, as though it were a prison, and I was denied permission to see the living quarters by the Austrian Camp Leader. (This is the man against whom the inmates of Klosterneuburg camp had revolted last month. There had been trouble earlier at the Traiskirchen camp when he was Lagerleiter there. This job is a political plum, as are so many in a land plagued by the combined evils of ubiquitous bureaucracy and coalition Proporz.)

Kaiser Ebersdorf is more cheerful. It was also a Caserne, for the artillerymen of the Empire, and the buildings that now house the refugees surround a dreary weedgrown drill field, in one corner of which the younger refugees have managed a pitiful open air dance pavilion. The physical plant is not much better, but a vastly different atmosphere prevails. This seems largely to the credit of the Lagerleiter, a friendly and efficient young Austrian, and the local representative of the Austrian Red Cross, himself a Hungarian refugee from Transylvania who, as he said, "can talk their language." A big, powerful man with a drooping black moustache, he looks like a young Franz Deak and governs his flock with a true Magyar aggressiveness and a domineering self-confidence. His attitude is patronizing, but the refugees take it from him as they will not take it from an Austrian. His office, pungent with the October smell of several dozen crates of apples (paid for by the British Red Cross, which supplies all the camps with fresh fruit), is a camp confessional and psychiatric clinic.

The housing in these casernes is all much alike: big barrack rooms, partitioned off where possible with bits of plywood or beaverboard or cloth to give families some privacy. A smell of Magyar cooking pervades all, although at Kaiser Ebersdorf those who work out (now 90% of the men there) can take meals at the communal kitchen in a separate building. There are communal showers and toilets and laundry rooms, all intended for soldiers, not for family living.

The biggest problem at one camp, the Lagerleiter has complained, is keeping the plumbing going. "We have had to put out 11,000 Schillings alone just repeatedly to clear food garbage out of the drains," he said. The statement implies the general attitude of cultural superiority assumed by the Germans toward "those people" from the East. On the other hand, my own landlady, a forty-year resident of Vienna and a German, uses her toilet for garbage disposal, too, to my eternal consternation.

This is the heart of the residual Hungarian refugee problem in Austria: the seven thousand who remain in camps. The best of the refugees have emigrated or have quietly been integrated into Austrian life, losing their identity as refugees in a Vienna that, once an imperial capital, already has a legacy of Czechs, Magyars, South Slavs and Poles. The extent of the "integration problems" of this last group is typified by one opera singer who escaped from Hungary complete with wife and seven children. After some initial difficulties he got a job with the Graz opera, and next season expects to move to the Vienna opera. He is doing well. His remaining problem is housing: apparently no one in Vienna wants seven children and a rehearsing baritone in his house! A relief agency, despairing of finding him a flat, is building him a house.

But for those still in the camps the story is different. Austria cannot send them elsewhere, because they either cannot or will not emigrate, and settlement is difficult because they are for various reasons unable to make much money and because most are becoming increasingly incapable of standing on their own feet. The Austrian government proposes to close down the Lower Austrian camps for the Hungarians one by one, as it can. At this time it appears likely that some of the present inhabitants will be left to join the ranks of some 50,000 "old" or permanent refugees (half of them ethnic Germans) lodged in camps in the western six provinces of the country. For the many who must stay because they are old, sick, unemployable, or have retarded children, this is an entirely undeserved tragedy.

The youths in this residual group present the most frustrating cases, are the source of most of the friction with the Austrians, and have a special significance for anyone attempting to understand the basic problems of Central Europe today. Most of the refugees who came out in 1956 were young people, many of them unaccompanied teenagers. This fact is the unique feature of the Hungarian refugee situation. In principle highly employable and mobile, they were an important reason why the bulk of the Hungarian refugees could be so quickly placed and integrated. Of those who had arrived in the United States by the middle of last year (by which time most had gone), 72% were between the ages of 16 and 45. Forty percent were single, predominantly males, and 34% were rated as having skills currently needed by the U.S. economy. (The National Academy of Sciences est-

that the education of the university graduates among these immigrants represented an investment in excess of $30,000,000.)

But for the tens of thousands of these young people who made new lives for themselves, thousands stayed here, and the very traits that had been heroic in Hungary in 1956 now make them unsatisfactory citizens in Austria, as difficult to fit into the pattern of Western society now as before into the Socialist pattern.

In all the camps these idle youngsters are much in evidence. They lounge about in dungarees and odd bits of donated clothing - I noticed one in a U.S. Navy cadet flight jacket - wear their hair long and affect the look of the more dubious characters in an American rock and roll film. When asked to do jobs around the camp, they are very reluctant and refuse if possible. At Klosterneuburg several stood around and watched while an old lady helped me hustle a heavy crate of books for the camp library up four flights of steps.

A Viennese newspaperman reports leaving the camp at Kagran and having an Austrian youth call out to him: "There - look at that." An elegant young Hungarian was driving a new brown Volkswagen through the Caserne courtyard. "He doesn't work, but he can buy a Volkswagen for 25,000 Schillings. With what, I ask you?"

Not, one suspects, with the 30 Schillings a month pocketmoney given each camp refugee by the Austrian government.

These are the teenagers, many of them "mixed up kids" when they came out of Hungary, who have been completely demoralized by two years of camp life. Over their ultimate fate the agency case workers shake their heads in discouragement. They will not work and they will not emigrate. Get them a job or put them in an Austrian vocational school and they are fired or dismissed. When asked what the problem is, they reply; "I want to go back to camp. I won't be a problem there." In camp they can sleep till noon and no one cares, and then play cards the rest of the day, and they are delighted with this version of Western "freedom". Camp sexlife is also generally free and easy, and this too they are reluctant to leave behind. When they want pocketmoney, it can be stolen more easily than earned, and so some move from camp to jail and afterward back to camp to begin again.

The agency workers are beginning to "close the files" on these youngsters. "I tell them if they will not let me get them a job and yet they don't want to emigrate," one said, "then at least I'll no longer let them be a burden on the American taxpayer." So they return to camp, which is what they wanted to do, and continue being a burden on the Austrian taxpayer, whose patience also may have an end.

In a world full of suffering and in what has been called "the century of the homeless man", the fate of a mere 7000 refugees can easily be overlooked - except in Lower Austria where they happen to be. Here the Austrian government, the United Nations High Commissioner,

the U.S. government and a host of voluntary agencies are involved in a final effort to find a solution before these last relics of the 1956 Hungarian rising become permanent statistics in the High Commissioner's reports.

Their story, while atypical because it is short and because comparatively so much has been done for them, is a handy introduction to the complex problem of forced human migrations in central Europe since 1918, and to the individual misery and social upheaval that invariably accompany these uprootings. Approximately 15,000,000 have crowded into Western Europe in the years since 1945. Exiles and emigres are no new phenomenon, but the quantity of them now on hand is one of the hallmarks of this particular age of conflict. The Hungarian tragedy was a dramatic reminder that refugees are still being made and are likely to continue to be made as long as the present world situation lasts. The rapid resettlement of 90% of the Hungarians proved that, given sufficient world concern and money (which no other refugee group has had), the refugee's plight is not hopeless. The social problems now encountered by a small country attempting to absorb a small number of refugees provide a significant sample of the lasting tensions, miseries and cost of a refugee situation, and of its inherent political dangers.

Sincerely,

Dennison Rusinow

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