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“I never felt like a  
complete stranger.”  
Stations of a flight  
from Hungary in  
autumn 1956

## Events at the time

“More refugees from Hungary” ran the headline of the daily Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ) at the end of October 1956 in Germany, referring to the mostly young people who had been escaping to Austria since a week. The subtitle commented: “Austria grants every help-seeker asylum” (FAZ, 31/10/1956, 4). The European dailies devoted many pages to the political developments in Hungary these last days of October in 1956. Headlines like “Russians quell Hungarian rebellion” and “Hungarian tragedy” (FAZ, 25/10/1956, 1) or “Hungarian army joins the revolution” (FAZ, 27/10/1956, 1) aimed, on the one hand, at mapping political explanations and comments concerning the protests and demonstrations of the population in Hungary. On the other hand, the paramount headlines beside them reflected the fact that the political events in Hungary were only one element of a volatile global political situation.

The political order in post-war Europe and the Middle East and the resulting power structures still harboured various smouldering hot spots. The world’s political interest was focussed on the Suez crisis at the time. Great Britain and France had prepared to occupy the Suez Canal in secret collusion with Israel. They had even kept this secret from the USA, their political ally. As a consequence of this constellation the USA and Soviet Union, although anything but on friendly terms, were now jointly searching for diplomatic ways of resolving the conflict around the Suez region based on the stipulations of the United Nations General Assembly, and were highly averse to kindling new conflicts. “America wants to help without intervening” commented the dailies, and reported that assistance was being provided by the Red Cross, as well as food, and that a Third World War needed to be avoided, although “Washington’s sympathies are clearly with ... the Hungarian struggle for independence” (FAZ, 29/10/1956). This approach highlights how fragile the political alliances were at that time, even among the Western Allies. At least on the part of the USA and the Soviet Union, there was no direct political interest in challenging the post-war order of central Europe by military means, at this point in time.

This meant that although the Hungarian government’s appeals for political support to the Western powers were registered, the latter had little interest in intervening and thereby provoking a militarily dangerous confrontation with the Soviet Union. Diplomatic protest notes were exchanged and many observers described their impressions to the world press, but military support from the Western nations was not forthcoming. This underlying political constellation had a significant effect on the events in Hungary and their consequences in the years to follow.

References to the attendant outpouring of thousands of refugees, most of all young Hungarians, to the West, were another integral element of this public perception. Austria was initially one of the main destinations where the refugees sought shelter. The reason was that the shared green border in western Hungary, which ultimately also marked a divide between Western and Eastern Europe in those years, still permitted their escape. What had happened in Hungary and

sparked this massive flow of refugees to the West? A great many publications by historians, authors and contemporary photographers have delved into the events in Hungary and their repercussions (see Lendvai 1999; Konrád 2006). This is where the account of an individual fate comes in, based on an interview<sup>1</sup> with a Berlin resident from Hungary (I.N.) who has left his home country because of the political conditions and expectable reprisals.

“Well, the 1956 story actually started earlier, everything began in March 1956 in Szeged in the south of Hungary”, as Mr. N. explains. He has studied the political conditions and events attending his own escape from Hungary in the autumn of 1956, and recounts that students from Szeged established the “Working Committee 15 March” in 1956 to commemorate the Hungarian people’s struggle for freedom in 1848/49, and to align themselves with it. Although the Hungarians had been vanquished by the Austrians and Russians, their allies in these years of revolution, Hungarian elites would continue to entertain the ideal of national independence right into the 20th century.

This idea of political independence had initially started flaring up again in the first half of the 1950s. The political order in Europe after the Second World War led to a clear division into eastern and western alliances. Hungary was part of the socialist camp at the time, which was determined by the Soviets. This meant that Soviet troops were stationed in Hungary and that the political mentality and ideology were still largely informed by Stalinist ideas. With freedom of opinion deemed undesirable, all efforts of an economic, military and cultural-ideological nature were to be subordinated to the cohesion of the politically aligned socialist countries instead. This is also why Hungary was a member of the Warsaw Pact, a militarily determined defence treaty of socialist countries, the formal counterpart to NATO.

However, the reform plans for a politically independent Hungary, that had now found their first organized expression in Szeged, fell on fertile ground in the Hungarian population as a whole. Many Hungarian citizens wanted an independent, neutral status for their country, and hoped for political and personal liberties on that basis, as well as more say.

The spring of 1956 had witnessed first signals for a political departure, for example, the rehabilitation of leading Hungarian politicians who had been convicted in show trials as recently as 1948 (Steiniger 2006). “... there was a great turnout in town in the beginning of October 1956 when important politicians were re-interred as a result of their rehabilitation.”<sup>2</sup> Newspapers could even be published uncensored for a short period of time, such as the Monday paper(s) in October 1956. Particularly the young people, many of whom were students, were very open to these new and democratic ideas, and willing to champion them. As the autumn of 1956 progressed, discussion forums sprang up at several universities, that later gave rise to the student protests.

As Mr. N. recalls: “... then these students from Szeged also came to Budapest, to the Technical University, where I studied at the time. ... And in the evening



**Fig. 1** Insurgents taking down a “Lenin Street” sign in Magyaróvár, October 1956

| bpk/Benno Wundshammer

there was a great student meeting in the assembly hall. The guests described what they wanted to do in Budapest. ... the plans also included a student march to the memorial for General Bem, a symbolic figure from the Hungarian struggle for freedom in 1848. ... Voices from the Communist Party, the university's party secretary amongst them, were shown the door. ... we had also been promised that cadets from the military academy would join us".

"On the march, one could already see the first flags amongst the students in the procession where the emblem of the communist party had been cut out. The cortege led across Margaret Bridge to the parliament ... and there we stood until evening. ... At the same time ... part of the demonstration had gone to the radio building to make their demands known with greater effect ... later on, the news said that people had already been shot in front of the radio building. ... I left the demonstration around 9:30 p.m., back to my student hostel ... and the very same night soldiers came and searched everything at our place, even the beds, for hidden weapons ... that was the night from the 23rd to the 24th of October 1956"<sup>3</sup> (see also Konrád 2006, 112). ▶ Fig. 1

Mr. N. describes this large demonstration, still recounted in history books today, from his own experience. He had taken a stand as one of many to support the demands for more democracy and greater freedom of opinion. But he quickly came to realize the ambivalence in the positions of the political elites. The protests by the largely young demonstrators found many different forms of expression. Most of all emblematic insignia of the Communist Party and Soviet presence in Hungary were demolished, taken down, painted over, etc.

"On the day after next, I wanted to go to the other side of town, ... and was careless enough to take the route passing by the front of the parliament. Shots were just being fired from the roofs of the buildings ... at the demonstrators; we tried to hide in the front entrances ... then trucks came and took away many dead bodies ... I turned around and wanted to return to the student hostel and only 100 m down the road I was arrested. ... then I was brought to a basement—that was the secret police— ... and waited for what would happen now."

Mr. N. was questioned. As he sums it up today, his quick release was only attributable to a stroke of luck. By chance, the officer discovered in Mr. N.'s wallet that both of them were taking Italian language courses at the Italian embassy. This shared interest appears to have kindled a certain sympathy for the young student N. "... Then I went back to the student hostel." On the Saturday to follow, October 27th, 1956, Mr. N. and some of his fellow students who were also from western Hungary decided to leave the city, "and go home" to keep out of further harm's way.

### Escape routes—experience of displacement

"But there were no trains. So we set out on foot along the tracks ... railwaymen had told us "there and there you need to watch out because the Russians are in

these villages already.” Up to 200,000 Soviet soldiers were stationed in Hungary at the time, approximately. This military presence was based on the self-understanding of the Soviet Union’s and entire Eastern Block’s alliance. Which is why “it was important to be careful. ... The villagers helped us; they told us which way we could take. We walked all the way to Bicske, circa 40 kilometres from Budapest. There we stood in front of the church; it was around seven in the evening and mass was being held. ... Later the villagers each took one (of us) home and gave us food and shelter”. For Mr. N. and his friends, this was their first experience of spontaneous solidarity and help from the populace.

In the following days, the students managed to continue on their way west by train and hitch-hiking. They spent the nights at stations and with acquaintances. “I clearly realized after the experiences in Budapest that I must get out. I wanted to go to France because I spoke good French. On November 17, I went to Győr, where they already had normal train schedules along ... (but) it was already obvious by then that nothing will come of it.”

A pro-Soviet government had been formed in Budapest, soon after the Soviet troops marched in on November 4th, 1956. As a consequence, most of those who supported reforms for national independence and neutrality were imprisoned, interned, or convicted and even executed. Approximately 200,000 Hun-



Fig. 2 “Vienna: centre of the readiness to make sacrifices for Hungary” | FAZ, 30/10/1956



garians left the country, as a result, with only around 80,000 returning anytime soon. For most of them, temporary asylum became their permanent place of residence.

But Mr. N. continued his way to the west anyway. "... we travelled to Nagycenk, where we got off and our numbers grew and grew ... we marched towards Austria, three kilometres on foot to the green Austrian border ... we then continued with a border official to the village of Deutschkreutz, where we were served tea and sandwiches. The people were gathered in the school building and buses came in the morning and brought us to Oberpullendorf; we only stayed there one night, and then continued to Eisenstadt with motorbuses." "In the meantime, the ... Austrians had made preparations for accepting a larger number of refugees", as the press put it. One comment ran: "The riflemen's barracks in the capital of the Burgenland, Eisenstadt, are ready to accommodate up to one thousand people ..." (FAZ, 25/10/2016).

Mr. N. experiences this support as reflected in the press very directly. "I spent a number of days in Eisenstadt. There was a sudden announcement that students who want to continue their studies ... and go to Vienna should assemble outside in front of the barrack." The barrack he mentions had been used by Soviet soldiers up to their withdrawal from Austria in the year 1955. "... I went outside too, several buses were standing there, and I boarded one but ... the wrong one ... because it didn't go to Vienna, but to the south towards Carinthia ... via Klagenfurt, Villach, Spittal. ... at some point we arrived in the middle of the night in Steinfeld in the Drautal valley, where we stayed for several weeks until December 22nd, 1956. Around half were girls." The refugees were provided with food and accommodation there, but what would come next was still up in the air. ▶ Fig. 2

"Good-hearted souls came by every day and brought some kind of donation, everything they didn't urgently need." Only then did the journey continue. Those who wanted to go to France "were bussed to Vienna. After spending the night in a youth hostel, we were able to continue ... (and were) conveyed to Strasbourg on a train". The way there led through southern Germany: "... what happened was that the train never stopped anywhere along the entire route, the doors were locked ... the French secret police had already boarded in Vienna and then all the people were questioned one by one. An interpreter helped if anyone didn't speak French." This procedure, in whose regard the interview also confirms the historic descriptions in the press<sup>4</sup>, demonstrates how the western nations were involved in handling the events in Hungary. They never directly intervened politically or even militarily, but did help the many refugees. ▶ Fig. 3

Mr. N.'s recollections highlight the extent of the Austrian peoples' solidarity with the transients. "They never asked for our papers; that I had studied and taken my A-levels before that, they took one's word for it, without papers", as he recalls, adding "one could have also not presented them." Upon their arrival in Strasbourg they were brought to the campus of the university and "we slept there, I

think, for two nights, we never saw anything of (the town)". The next stop was Combloux, very close to Mègeve. "They waited for us at the station. The chalet, a kind of hotel, was only three kilometres away and we stayed there until January 25th, 1957, or so. And from there we were distributed with the initial question: 'What do you want to study?', In which case you can go here and there." Having already attended one in Budapest, Mr. N. said that a technical college would be perfect. "And so I came to Grenoble and was first of all given a provisional *carte d'identité* as a refugee pass ... later a normal identity card. One was provided with the identification documents without presenting a birth certificate."<sup>5</sup> This liberal approach lacking strict controls created good conditions for the young

## Mehr Flüchtlinge aus Ungarn

### Oesterreich gewährt jedem Hilfesuchenden Asyl

Eigener Bericht unseres Korrespondenten

Ko. Wien, 30. Oktober. Seit Beginn dieser Woche ist die Zahl der aus Ungarn nach Oesterreich kommenden Flüchtlinge stark angewachsen. Allerdings kann man noch nicht von einem Flüchtlingsstrom sprechen. Die Leute stammen aus allen Teilen Ungarns, auch aus Budapest. In den letzten 36 Stunden wurden in der burgenländischen Hauptstadt Eisenstadt 115 ungarische Flüchtlinge von den österreichischen Behörden registriert und nach Ausstellung provisorischer Papiere ins Landesinnere, zumeist nach Oberösterreich, in Lager weiterverwiesen. Die österreichischen Behörden halten sich streng an den Grundsatz, jedem Hilfesuchenden Asyl zu gewähren; ganz gleich, aus welchen Gründen er kommt. So werden im Augenblick auch Leute aufgenommen, bei denen man vermutet, daß sie Mitglieder der geheimen Staatspolizei in Ungarn waren und jetzt aus Angst vor der Rache der Freiheitskämpfer geflohen sind. Jeder Flüchtling wird jedoch im Lager einem genauen Ueberprüfungsverfahren unterzogen, und sollte es sich hierbei herausstellen, daß er kriminelle Verbrechen begangen hat, so werden ihn die Oesterreicher an die ungarische Grenze zurückschicken. Viele wollen nur so lange in Oesterreich bleiben, bis sich die Verhältnisse in Ungarn normalisiert haben. Es ist bezeichnend für die äußerst gespannte Stimmung und unübersichtliche Entwicklung, die in Ungarn und besonders in Budapest herrschen, daß diese Menschen meist erst am Sonntag und Montag, nachdem die erste Welle der Kämpfe bereits verebbt war, geflüchtet sind, weil, wie sie erzählen, die ungarische Bevölkerung die Ueberzeugung habe, daß der blutige Bürgerkrieg noch längst nicht zu Ende sei.

In einem Gespräch an der Grenze bei Oedenburg (Sopron) im südlichen Burgenland mit einigen Studenten der dortigen Technischen Hochschule, die in diesem Gebiet zusammen mit einer Gruppe von Jungarbeitern die Macht in der Hand halten, äußerten sich die jungen Ungarn sehr besorgt über die mögliche zukünftige Entwicklung. Gerade Sopron

ist eines der Beispiele dafür, wie sehr es den Freiheitskämpfern an geschulten Leuten mangelt, weil die antikommunistisch eingestellte Intelligenz entweder ausgerottet wurde oder aber so eingeschüchert ist, daß sie es nicht wagt, sich bei der derzeit ungelärten Situation schon zu exponieren. So führt ein 21 Jahre alter Student heute das ganze Komitat Sopron. Drei Hochschulprofessoren sitzen an der Grenze und übernehmen die aus Oesterreich eintreffenden Hilfeleistungen zum weiteren Transport ins Landesinnere und zur Verteilung in Sopron selbst.

**Von der freien Welt verlassen?**

Die Studenten erkennen zwar die große karitative Hilfsaktion Oesterreichs und der europäischen Staaten für Ungarn dankbar an, sind aber bitter enttäuscht, daß der Westen ihnen nicht auch in anderer Form, vor allem durch die Lieferung von Waffen, unter die Arme greift. Durch die jahrelange Abgeschlossenheit vom westlichen Ausland machen sie sich völlig illusionistische Vorstellungen über die Hilfsmöglichkeiten des Westens. Vor allem haben sie auf die Vereinten Nationen vertraut und geglaubt, daß ihr Generalsekretär ebenso wie bei Konflikten im Nahen Osten nun auch in Ungarn sofort eine Vermittlerrolle übernehmen würde. Weil dies nicht geschehen ist, fühlen sie sich von der freien Welt verlassen.

**Tanger-Erklärung unterzeichnet**

Madrid, 30. Oktober (dpa). In Tanger ist am Montagabend die Schlußerklärung und außerdem ein Protokoll der internationalen Konferenz unterzeichnet worden, die zwei Wochen lang den zukünftigen Status der Stadt beraten hat. In der Erklärung werden sämtliche bisher bestehenden Verträge oder Abkommen über Tanger als ungültig bezeichnet. Der Sultan allein als Repräsentant der marokkanischen Souveränität besitzt fortan das Recht, der Stadt Sonderrechte wirtschaftlicher und finanzieller Art zu geben. Darüber soll in den nächsten Tagen weiter verhandelt werden.

Fig. 3 "More refugees from Hungary" | FAZ, 03/10/1956

people. The acceptance of their “refugee status” and the consistent offer to continue their education, including extensive financial assistance, facilitated personal perspectives for those seeking refuge.

Mr. N. was able to continue his studies and polish his language skills, not only in French. This concrete support secured his personal and professional advancement. Asked how he coped with the language-related challenges, he said that he had already spoken good French in his school days, which proved a great advantage under the conditions of his escape.

His later journey through life also led him to the Netherlands and Germany. His life experience, moulded by the escape in his youth, but also his self-assertion in the new terrain, have turned him into a self-confident man with a critical awareness. His extensive language skills in French, Dutch, German and Hungarian, naturally, have enabled him to amass an extensive knowledge of the literature from these countries. He is still observing the political constellations and developments in Europe and beyond with great interest to this day.

Countless Hungarians left their country at the time to go to Western Europe and Yugoslavia. Many of them returned to Hungary again after a relatively short period of time. But most of them have established and integrated themselves in other countries. Mr. N married in Germany in 1962 and became a German citizen in 1966. Not until 1967 would he return to Hungary to visit his family, with whom he had stayed in touch by mail. He lives in Berlin to this day.

- 1 The author interviewed Mr. I. N. on 03/02/2016 in Berlin.
- 2 Interview excerpts.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 The headline “More refugees from Hungary” was followed by

a description of the help afforded young people after their flight from Hungary. They were provided with provisional papers upon registration and then sent on to other regions of

Austria. “The Austrian authorities are strictly observing the principle of offering every help-seeker asylum” (FAZ, 31/10/1956, 3).

- 5 Interview excerpt.

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