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Критичко издање историјске грађе

A very personal journey through recent history: Interview with János Harcsa

Introduction

The failure of the Hungarian fight for freedom and national independence during the thirteen days of the 1956 Revolution caused the emigration of around 200,000 Hungarian citizens, of whom around 180,000 sought refuge in Austria. Between the first and second Soviet interventions, from October 24 to November 4, 1956, most members of the Hungarian secret police with families, fearing persecution, fled to Yugoslavia (estimates of their number were from 1,500 thousand to 2,000 people), but most of them returned after the situation had calmed. After the rebellion was stifled, when re-enforced control of the western border made escape hazardous, around 20,000 Hungarian refugees crossed the southern border and found themselves in refugee camps throughout Yugoslavia within the first few months of 1957.

Already in November 1956, during the negotiations on Imre Nagy's asylum at the Yugoslav embassy, Yugoslavia posed the question of refugees, demanding a prompt reaction from János Kádár's government, and as their influx increased, the problem of shelter and provisions became increasingly pressing and dominated all Yugoslav-Hungarian contacts in 1957. Joint Yugoslav-Hungarian commissions visited refugee camps in Yugoslavia for months and more or less openly pressured the refugees to return to Hungary. Considering the number of repatriated, it cannot be said that they were overly successful. According to official Yugoslav data and the United Nations' data, from October 23, 1956, to December 31, 1957, 19,857 persons fled to the territory of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia; 16,374 emigrated to

the West, 2,773 persons were repatriated, only 634 refugees integrated into Yugoslav society, and 76 persons were registered as missing.

International relief and monetary aid were crucial in the finalization of the refugee problem. Primarily thanks to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migrations Yugoslav authorities solved this problem early in 1958. Among European countries, France accepted the largest number of refugees (2,445), followed by Belgium (2,376), Sweden (1,295), West Germany (1,131), and Switzerland (744). Austria accepted 381 refugees, Denmark 212, Italy 170, Holland 80, Norway 344, and Great Britain 287. The Scandinavian countries accepted 200 tuberculosis patients and the other countries accepted all the disabled; 2,509 Hungarian refugees settled in the United States, 1,765 went to Canada, and 1,500 to Australia.

The Yugoslav attitude towards the refugee problem was in correlation with its reaction to the Hungarian Revolution in general. It modified with Yugoslavia's adjustment to the evolving situation in Hungary and the international reactions to the Hungarian events, always maintaining a characteristic ambivalent position. After the failed attempt of closing the border and turning the refugees back, Yugoslavia faced a large number of refugees arriving at the border and, heeding the international public reaction, reluctantly accepted them.

Towards the 65th anniversary of the outbreak of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution and in the memory of the exodus of tens of thousands of Hungarians from their homeland, the Institute of History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences decided to prepare a handbook on the post-1956 Hungarian refugee crisis and to give an informed and analytical overview on the large scale humanitarian efforts that followed their flee. I was invited to participate in this international project with a study on the typical coping strategies on the side of refugees in Yugoslavia, what was the role of social capital in getting along, on the main actors involved in the refugee assistance, and their activities in favor of refugees, etc. Until that moment, a year ago, all my knowledge about the 1956 Hungarian refugees in Yugoslavia was based on archival sources. I got acquainted with the testimonies of refugees through historiographical literature, but I did not meet anyone who in 1956 fled from Hungary through Yugoslavia.

Then, surprisingly, I got an email from Mr. János Harcsa. He contacted me hoping that I could find a photo or film from the refugee camp in Gerovo, Croatia. That was when our correspondence started, and a few months later it resulted in the interview presented here. As an eight-year-old boy, he fled with his family to Yugoslavia at the end of November 1956. The Harcsa family was placed in Gerovo, the largest refugee camp in Yugoslavia. Mr. Harcsa's personal experience and perception of Gerovo prison, as he calls it, is a significant contribution to the better understanding of the

situation in which the refugees found themselves and confirms the knowledge that can be obtained from archival sources by supplementing them. However, his exciting memories do not refer only to the refugee days spent in Yugoslavia but are also a valuable testimony of a time and the intertwined destinies in this area. Through his life story history comes alive and facts taken from archival sources become more vivid and more immediate.

The interview was conducted in writing in October 2020.

János Harcsa was born in Mohács, Hungary, in 1948. The Harcsa family fled to Yugoslavia in 1956. He moved to England in 1962. Although his education was interrupted a few times, he completed his professional qualification in export management. He joined Burmah Castrol as a regional manager for the development of exports to the USSR and Eastern Europe in 1986 and opened the market for the company in materials for infrastructure construction mainly in the repairs and construction of runways, bridges, ports, dams, etc. Simultaneously he developed his own business, later investing in forestry and in domestic rental properties, which both are current family businesses. In 1990 he started his own private export company, remained in the construction industry, and continued working in the USSR and Eastern Europe. At the end of his working life, he sold their Company share to the other shareholders. He is happily married and lives with his family in England.

Interview with János Harcsa

A contribution to oral history

Mr. Harcsa, do you know why your parents decided to flee to Yugoslavia? Is it because of the proximity of the border, since you lived in Mohács, or was there some other reason? Did you have relatives or friends in Yugoslavia?

Both my parents took an active part in the Revolution, especially my father in Budapest at the occupation of the Radio station and skirmishes with the ÁVO,¹ which ended in bloody brutality, same as it did later on in Pécs and Mohács. In my opinion, it was not surprising that the Hungarians revolted, considering that the Red Army brutally occupied Hungary in 1944 even though that Hungary was forced into submission to support the Axis powers. After the butchery of the Hungarian 2nd Army on the Russian front, where it lost over 100,000 soldiers in three days, the Hungarian

¹ Magyar Államrendőrség Államvédelmi Osztálya (Hungarian State Police State Defense Department; since 1950 Államvédelmi Hatóság, ÁVH - State Security Authority), 1946-1956, the political police dissolved after the 1956 Revolution.

army was on the retreat and only regrouped to defend Hungary at Debrecen and Budapest. Following the Red Army's occupation of Hungary, the Soviets imposed their brand of communism in Hungary with the help of the Hungarian communists and their sympathizers, with the enormous brutality of the ÁVO, which thankfully was disbanded after the Revolution. The West was amazed at what the 1956 Revolution achieved in a very short time by the civilian population with basic weaponry of rifles and machine guns, stolen half-serviced tanks, and Molotov cocktails. Many women even came out onto the streets with nothing else than kitchen implements. The Soviets pretended that they were leaving Hungary, but sadly they brutally demonstrated their frustration with gory violence in many cases.

I have some confusion with the exact date of our escape. For some reason, I have in my mind 27-29th of November, which on reflection may not be accurate. I know that the Soviets were leaving around the end of October, as we were on the banks of the Danube waving goodbye to the Russian ships as they were heading south to Yugoslavia and presumably to the Black Sea. The Soviets were removing their units from Hungary but there was a lot of confusion and rumors. My parents and their group were running around preparing for our escape via Austria. But then it emerged that the Soviet retreat out of Hungary was a cover only for their regrouping outside the borders. Secretly the Soviets left a beefed-up army command structure in Budapest. Some of the revolutionaries became aware of that. And then on the 4th of November, the Soviets did a *Blitzkrieg* attack on Hungary. Hungary had no chance to stand up to that. The suppression of the 1956 Revolution was achieved by the Soviets and Warsaw Pact countries by bringing together the biggest tank forces, mechanized units, and motorized land units since the attack on Berlin by General Zhukov. This all was allowed to happen as on the 29th of October the Suez crisis heated up and the West and NATO were not going to take on the Soviets. At the same time, the Soviets were fearful that the Hungarian revolution could be the springboard for the rest of East European independence, which, of course, eventually happened all the way to Moscow. I witnessed tanks taking on the communists at the Russian White House in Moscow in 1991.

My parents were with a group of revolutionaries who organized transport to the Austrian border. I know that there was a lot of panic, which must have happened around the end of October to the 4th of November. Since the route to Austria was no longer possible, because some Soviet tank divisions have closed the border with land troops, the decision was made to escape to Yugoslavia on a small road through Udvar, where unfortunately the no man's land was mined.²

²In the early 1950s the Hungarian border units were reorganized. A new border security system was implemented and systematic reinforcement of border guards towards Yugoslavia and partially towards Austria was carried out. In the summer of 1950 barbed wire was stretched along the entire border with

I should now say a little bit about my parents' background. Both of my parents were ethnic Hungarians, born in Vojvodina. At birth, they were Yugoslav citizens in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and both were fluent Serb speakers. When the Germans attacked Yugoslavia, my mother decided against her parents' advice to escape by swimming across the river Tisa to the west side occupied by the Hungarians and went to relatives in Pécs, where she spent the war years. I have no idea what she was doing there. Regrettably, although not surprisingly, for a Hungarian who was following ideas of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, my father joined the Wehrmacht HiPo³ division and served in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. He had a fiancée, a Serb lady who joined the Partisans. Unfortunately, very soon her unit got in a skirmish with the German army, and she was arrested. She was going to be executed by hanging in Senta. Thank God, my father found out about that and somehow managed to save her. Few war years after roles changed. My father's division was moved north of Belgrade and he was caught by the Partisans who were going to execute him. She was informed about his plight and, since in the meantime she became a prominent Partisan, she was in a position to save him. However, he was told in no uncertain terms that he should go to Hungary and never return to Yugoslav territory because he would be executed.

My father returned to Hungary and joined the Hungarian army. He was stationed with the re-grouped Second Hungarian Army defending Debrecen from the Red Army, which was beaten and retreated to defend Budapest. The civilian population of Budapest was suffering heavily from the German bombing, from the U.S. Air Force and the R.A.F. from Italy, and, finally, from the brutality of the Red Army in finishing off the Germans in Budapest, what these days the West calls collateral damage. Tragically, Yugoslavia, created by the Allies after the First World War, also experienced the same fate during its destruction in the 1990s. I suppose the Allies' NATO's and the EU's attitude at times seems to be *we give, and we take*. I apologize for expressing my anger about all our lives in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. My father was badly injured in Budapest and was taken to an army hospital in Pécs where he met my mother and got married in 1946. After his recovery, he stayed in the army supporting the police forces in gathering the freed criminals that were running havoc amongst the population. He was demobbed in 1947. During the land reform, they were given a house in Mohács and a smallholding house in Kisnyárád which they farmed. The land reform came about due to many German (Svab) families having

Yugoslavia; later it was doubled and pressure mines were placed along the line; a system of tripwire mines was set within a width of one kilometre into Hungarian territory.

³Hilfspolizei (HiPo), auxiliary police force in Nazi Germany in 1933; this term was also used for various military and paramilitary units and groups of local collaborators with the Nazi régime during WWII.

left the country as well as tragically many Jewish families being transported to the death camps etc. I hope the above helps you to understand the roots of my family.

My close and extended relatives, Hungarian families in Yugoslavia, had some diverse positions. My mother's father joined the Partisans, two of my uncles were prisoners of war in Germany, but in fact, they were East European slave workers building and rebuilding the Reich's infrastructure damaged during the American and British bombings. Others managed to escape the war quietly working on the land or under circumstances that are not clear to me.

You were transferred from Osijek to Gerovo. Yugoslav authorities mostly sent to Gerovo people waiting for a visa for a third country. They rarely sent whole families there. If you had defected 27-29th of November, you were transferred to Gerovo by mid-December of 1956, I presume. Was the camp already overcrowded at that time?

When we were crossing the border by a small crossing through no man's land there were no border guards. It was around seven o'clock in the morning with sleet/snow falling and right opposite where we were about to cross there was the Catholic Church. Instead of the congregation going into the church for early mass, they gathered outside the church and watched us. As we approached the border the sentries in the watchtowers noticed the commotion and shouted out "stop immediately or we will shoot" and they did. My mother panicked and ran away into no man's land. As the firing continued my father with me and my sister ran in a different direction. There was an explosion in the direction where my mother headed. After the explosion, the firing stopped. Mother disappeared. Father rested us in a ditch on the Yugoslav side and went looking for our mother.

My sister and I were huddled in the ditch being covered in mud and snow. After a while, we could hear voices and horses. Suddenly a carriage with four armed Yugoslav soldiers appeared. We were frightened as they sounded like Russians. To our relief, the soldiers put their guns over their shoulders and smiled at us. They lifted us out of the ditch and sat us on the carriage. Then they drove us to their base, where they dried us up and sat us down by the fire, giving us hot soup and bread. We had no idea what the soldiers were talking about. Neither of us could understand Serbian and none of them could or would not speak to us in Hungarian. Eventually, my father turned up with some other soldiers. Then an army officer turned with a Hungarian officer and a soldier on horseback. This led to an argument because the Yugoslav officer refused to hand us over. I suspect it was because my father, being fluent in Serbian, explained that his birthplace was in Yugoslavia, and based on that, the Yugoslav officer refused to extradite us to the Hungarians. The Hungarian officer did not sound very happy, rather disappointed that on this occasion they will not collect their escapees and beat them to the pulp as soon as they got them back on Hungarian territory.

We were lucky, and you will see, it follows us quite a bit because especially at that time the Yugoslav border guards were almost in collusion with the Hungarian border guards in returning the escapees unless they fit certain criteria that were useful to the Yugoslav government. My father and we, the kids, were taken to Beli Manastir where we stayed until the Yugoslav border guards brought my mother. They found her a couple of days later somewhere in the fields in a distressed state, badly injured from the ordeal and of the cold, hunger, and dehydration. They cleaned her up and gave her first aid. After that, they boarded us onto an army lorry and took us to Osijek, where the mother was looked after by medics, and then father and she one by one were interviewed. All I know is that my parents wanted to go to either the United States (we had an aunt in New York) or Australia.

We stayed in Osijek for about two weeks when suddenly we and a number of other families were put on a lorry, taken to the railway station at Vukovar with guards, and were heading for Zagreb, where we were met by representatives of the Yugoslav Red Cross, I believe. We were given some soup, sandwiches, and a small food parcel for the rest of our journey. Soon we boarded on another train which, I believe, stopped at Delnice and then the families were boarded onto military trucks. We were driven into the mountains, up steep slopes, ravines, on a very bumpy long ride, and then we descended through rough roads into the valley of the Žumberak Mountains to Gerovo.⁴ We arrived at night, got out of the truck, and entered the prison surrounded by a high barbed wire, with observation posts and strong lighting, which was strictly guarded by armed soldiers and police with dogs.⁵

I have no idea why we were brought to that Gerovo prison. I think it was probably because we escaped with a Hungarian army unit that crossed the border fully armed as it did not want to take up arms against its own people. Unit members were quietly escorted by the Yugoslav People's Army to Osijek, where they were disarmed and immediately taken to Gerovo.

Life in Gerovo was hard and desperate. Facilities were overcrowded, disgraceful dirty, without real heating to speak of, without running water, etc. The prison was built originally by the Monarchy and housed Russian prisoners most of whom were taken to Kranjska Gora to build the road over Vršič to Trenta where hundreds died in an avalanche. During the Second World War, it was used by the Ustasha as a prison

⁴The camp was located in Gorski Kotar, the mountainous region above Rijeka, away from bigger places and major roads, but near the Italian border, with no running water, medical care or other facilities. From the Yugoslav authorities' point of view, Gerovo was an ideal location for an assembly centre for all emigrants in Yugoslavia in the 1950s: a temporary shelter and transit camp for further emigration to the West. When Hungarian refugees began crossing the Yugoslav border, mostly singles were directed to this camp until it became overpopulated.

⁵All camps for the 1956 Hungarian refugees were surrounded by barbed wire and had guards, even the Center for integration in Mišar, but the camp in Gerovo was under a special regime due to its specific purpose.

for Serbs many of whom were executed there. Jews and Roma were also gathered there, to be later transported to Austria and Poland, to death camps. We inherited those miserable facilities for our miserable stay there. We were billeted in a large room with other families and bedded either on straw and blanket on the floor and some refugees on steel beds with straw and blanket. In the middle of the room, which housed probably about forty women and children, there was a wood burner. Fathers had to sleep with the other men, most of whom on our arrival were Hungarian soldiers. The room was cold, and the windows were frozen for most of the time. There was no food or drinks on our arrival.

Initially, we drew water in buckets that we filled near the guardhouse. After a while with many pleadings and by the intervention of the UNHCR running water was installed into the corridors near the filthy latrines. There was a regime for cleaning the facility by the refugees but with chlorine only. It was hardly surprising that the latrines were in very poor condition. At one point the women were given pots in which they could heat water. They waited in line to heat the water on the only existing stove, to wash the children and themselves, but in the absence of soap, that washing was very primitive. As far as I could see, no matter how hard he/she tried, the men/women just could not get used to it! Then there was a problem with lice. From time to time the guards brought DDT and sprayed the clothes of the refugees. Most of the inmates' men, women, and children were sprayed.

From the end of December to March we only had our filthy clothes, changed only when Mr. Ignatieff⁶ from the Canadian High Commission from Belgrade arrived with Yugoslav officials, what I believe was in March of 1957 when the visiting delegation brought some mixed clothing. A Yugoslav film crew came with them and filmed them handing us clothes and chocolate. Later, while we were with our grandparents, we were told that it was shown in Yugoslav cinema under the name *Plight of the Hungarian refugees* and that some of our relatives recognized our mother with children. It was a special day, as I remember because all the children had their first wash with soap! And the mothers with their children did their best to be tidy, as they were expecting something good. Well, we got some clothes and we were happy to get that little too.

I became very independent and spent most of my time with the Yugoslav soldiers who taught me to play chess and to use a certain military vocabulary, certainly not suitable for a child. Unfortunately, Hungarian officials came to the camp with doctors and nurses and a film crew that filmed the return of refugees to Hungary, their boarding on trucks with brochures, clothes, and food. Amnesty! Years later I wrote to a couple of soldiers and replies came back from two parents saying that they were treated harshly after the fanfare of their arrival back to Hungary and then were sent to

⁶ George Ignatieff (1913–1989), prominent Russian born Canadian diplomat in the post WWII period, Ambassador to Yugoslavia (1956–1958), permanent representative to NATO (1963–1966), Canadian Ambassador to the United Nations (1966–1969).

do hard labor. No escapee had a good outcome under so-called amnesty. I suppose the amnesty was perhaps that they did not shoot them, but who knows ... Some soldiers managed to get passage to Morocco to join the Foreign Legion.

There were a lot of comings and goings, officials with lots of arguments, the arrival of new refugees and transfer of refugees with a longer stay in Gerovo to Austria, from where, after processing, they were sent to countries all over the World. Then the transfer of children began. Mainly minors without parents were returned to Hungary.⁷ A lot of people also were going back to Hungary in fear of what will happen to their families. The trouble was that there were also hidden Hungarian infiltrators in the prison, who were stirring up the refugees with their stories. And then the Yugoslav authorities would let Hungarian officials into the camp, who in a relaxed way offered amnesty to all refugees who wanted to return to Hungary. Since 1965 I traveled all around Europe, Hungary, and Eastern Europe extensively, and I have not met one family or individuals that returned under the Amnesty deal that did not receive any kind of punishment. Those that did not receive hard punishment, suffered in a different way, by only being able to get the lowest jobs, etc.

After the collapse of communism, Hungarians all over the world were encouraged to return to their homeland, and the state still encourages them to expect various economic gains. However, until the early 1990s among the Hungarian population, the 1956 refugees were generally considered as *csőcselék*, mob, or scum, and most of them as those who were let out of the prison. By then I was pretty streetwise and was able to get on and I had done a lot of business in Hungarian infrastructure, but, ironically, I was either considered as an English Hungarian, or as a Yugoslav Hungarian. Hungarians can be very strange at times. Similarly, in the USSR, then in Russia, even though it was clear that I was Hungarian by birth, no one accepted or acknowledged that I was Hungarian, except a few good friends and the KGB. This is my view came about by the communist propaganda, so people did not want anything to do with the 56's (fifty-sixes), as they referred to us. As I was traveling on a Yugoslav passport they considered me as a Serb (*Ti naš!* - You belong to us!), which I did not mind as I considered my Yugoslav nationality to be proud of! Some people even considered me as a Slav. Ironically some English acquaintances and even neighbors and friends consider me as Russian due to the many years and business I have done in Russia! At that time, I was working on some construction projects. I am drifting again!

⁷In the spring of 1957, all Hungarian juveniles were assembled in Bela Crkva, Vojvodina. The Yugoslav Red Cross worked on their repatriation and all children under 14 were returned without undergoing any procedure, only on the written request by their parents. The terms for repatriation of juveniles between 14 and 18 were their parents' request and their own choice regarding the return. In case parents had not contacted the Red Cross within 60 days, the Custody body in Bela Crkva would authorize the transfer of the juvenile in question to a Western country.

Let's go back to Gerovo. The meals were very simple and we mostly ate once a day. The food was prepared by the refugees and the menu was mostly potato, cabbage, and bean stews, which to be honest was much the same as what we have been used to on the farm and it was tasty. I suspect that there was a good supply of onions, garlic, and paprika. There were some very good refugee bakers who really baked very nice bread, which when it was baked helped lace the stench all around us. Even the guards used to come in and trade various things for the bread, but most commonly cigarettes which were given out as a ration to everyone. Cigarette dollars!

When the soldiers left the camp I used to go to the guards who befriended me. They taught me how to ski and have taken me out of camp regularly, often stopped in mountain shelters for rest and hot soup. I did not receive any abuse. I just got on with life as it was at the moment, never expecting it to get better. To be honest, the trauma of the last few days in Hungary and the border crossing, the gunfire, my mother's screams, and lying in the ditch in fear of the Russian soldiers who turned out to be kind Yugoslav soldiers is what haunts me the most to this day. After that, the misery of our lives in the prison and the camps affected me when I saw my kids of the same age as I was. I often recall the fear and hunger in my mother's eyes! And now I see my grandchildren of a similar age as I was at the time of the Revolution and I reflect in fear, in spite of the fact that I have done well in a secure life after those events. I suppose you could say that I have been scarred for life. Probably you noticed by now that I do not speak about my sister's experience. That is because she never wanted to speak about it, as well as my parents always evaded the subject. They just wanted to forget as the other refugees have also. I do not know but I must have fallen closer to the tree trunk!

You were transferred to Kučevo in the spring of 1957. Why, because of bad conditions, especially for small children? By then your parents should have decided to go to a third country, return to Hungary, or integrate in Yugoslavia. Which option did they apply for?

My parents did decide to go to America or Australia. They have been interviewed and were waiting for their applications to be approved. The reason they moved us was due to the overcrowding and the place was getting very dirty. Some disturbances have started, and the guards had a handful in sorting it out almost on a daily basis. Fights erupted among many single men in the prison, of which many were young and middle-aged men. Some married women and daughters were molested. The UNHCR, Red Cross, and Mr. Ignatieff's delegation were arguing with Yugoslav officials. On top of this, the Yugoslavs allowed Hungarian officials to agitate among the refugees in the camp to return to Hungary. It seems that there was some kind of agreement between them. As a kid, I could not understand what was going on. As I said I used to hang around the guards. Suddenly one morning the families were rounded up and were handed out food parcels. Then we were loaded onto military trucks and off we

went. The women certainly looked relieved and happy. I think the Yugoslav authorities were under pressure to sort out the refugee mess, in particular the Gerovo prison.

It took us several days before we got to Kučevo, which was very different. The camp looked organized. There were no heavy guards like at Gerovo prison and the refugees were mainly families. Kids were playing outside. There were much better toilet and washing facilities. The camp was open during the day and parents could go to the nearest river/creek for a swim. Also, the camp had a Refugee Committee which was appointed among its own people/persons responsible for cooking, cleaning, maintaining order, etc.

Then a next tragedy came upon us. According to the camp rules, refugees were allowed to take on some employment locally, although not many of them used it, as many were on the move. Being fluent in Serbian my father did take on work outside. I have no idea what he was doing. He got friendly with the locals and as customary, after work he was going to the *krčma*, pub, and many times he used to come back to the camp drunk. My mother, who is a teetotaler, used to get angry with him. There were heated arguments between them, which frightened us, the children, and the other refugees. Sometimes father was violent. A number of times the Serbian guards would stop those quarrels and he would end up with them drinking together in the guard room. Then one night after another drunken argument, my mother ran to the guards for help. The camp commander happened to be there and she complained to him about the behavior of my father and the guards. I do not know what else my mother said. The camp commander felt sorry for her and assured her that he will deal with it.

This was in the evening and everyone was asleep in the barrack when suddenly a number of heavily armed security personnel burst in, arrested my father, and took him away. Since my father did not return, my mother went to the camp commander who informed her that it was out of his jurisdiction and that father was arrested by the Udba⁸ for events during the Second World War and was taken away to an unknown location, so she will not be able to contact or see him. My mother was petrified because she knew that it was about his service in the Wehrmacht HiPo unit. She asked for help to contact her father who still lived in Vojvodina. Through the camp commander, the local police connected my grandfather and my mother asked her father to take her home with the children. With the help of the camp commander, local police, and local authority my mother was given permission to leave the camp. They then took us to Osijek where some formalities were done with officials to allow us to remain in Yugoslavia and the next day my grandfather came to meet us. It was very emotional as my mother had not seen her father since she escaped from Yugoslavia at the beginning of the Second World War nearly 16 years ago as a young girl and

⁸ Uprava državne bezbednosti, UDB (State Security Administration; since 1966 Služba državne bezbednosti, SDB- State Security Service), 1946-1991.

here she was an adult distressed woman with two young children. My grandfather was given custody of us and we were on the way to our new home.

Where did you and your sister go to school? What was the attitude of the population towards you? Did it depend on their ethnicity? Did they sympathize with you? Did they help you in any way? Do you know the experiences of other Hungarian refugee families in the former Yugoslavia?

My grandfather's town in Vojvodina was very nice and in 1957 it was predominantly populated by the Hungarian population that have had their roots there for hundreds of years. Of course, most of the elderly people in Vojvodina were born as Hungarian citizens before 1918, but after 1918 that territory was taken as punishment for the First World War (71% of Hungarian territory with its population was taken away by the Allies and gifted to the neighbors). Towns in Vojvodina had a large population of mainly Serbs and apart from the war years they did live peacefully. Germany lost nothing, only the Rhineland and Sudetenland. I wonder why?!

We were accepted by the community as one of their own by both Hungarians and Serbs. The neighborhood was mixed. We now had been in a good home and our ordeal of the prison and camps was over. Although we missed quite a bit of our schooling we were given a place in the bilingual, Hungarian and Serbian elementary school at the same age group without disruption and later to the high school across the road which was also a mixed bilingual school. We were well received; in fact, we were a novelty. That wore off speedily. The reason being, at least in my case, is that we had a Hungarian dialect which the kids considered to be "uppity". Soon I was bullied and got beaten by my own kind. I was not in a happy place. I had no father to rely on, and, to top it all, my first cousin picked on me for similar reasons. As he lived next door I was taking attention of my grandparents away from him in his opinion.

It all came to a head one day after I have been abused and beaten up over several weeks, at one of our Serb neighbors where we were having a basketball match. My first cousin played on the opposing side. For an unknown reason, he started at me and kicked me in the head. I was hurt and bleeding and, worst of all, I lost my temper and beat him up badly, so much that my Serbian friends had to restrain me otherwise I don't know how it would have ended. He then run across the road to my grandparents howling his head off, on which my grandmother took a sizable rod and beat me up, breaking the rod on my back. Then she burst into tears saying "why are you smiling, son" and I said, "you are the last person that will ever beat me up again, and I take this beating out of love." From that day onward I stuck with the Serbian kids who were tough guys. And if any of the Hungarian kids would have started on me, they soon would get run from me and my Serbian friends. My mother used to come to school regularly to get a lecture about my behavior and my class teacher would say "he is so little but takes on the biggest kids." I was well streetwise following Gerovo prison.

During my stay in Yugoslavia in the second half of the 1950s, I joined the *izviđači*, the scouts, and became a *porečanin*.⁹ I became an active member of the Association that has shaped my young life especially after the turmoil of life in the refugee camps. My schooling was not the best but was acceptable. One thing my mother did push me on was to learn German and Serbian which was getting better fast as I was mixing in the Serbian community. As time went on I made a few good Hungarian friends out of which only one friend has remained after all these years. I am partly ashamed to say that I received harsh treatment from members of my own nation. In fact, I can say that I have never had any arguments or fights with any Serbs when I was young and in my adult life. One thing that has offended me over the years is that Hungarians in Hungary regularly would refer to me as an English Hungarian or a Slav Hungarian. To this day I do not understand the attitude, and now, as I am too old, I try not to worry about it. But in any case, I learned how to exist and did a lot of business in Hungary over the years on big projects and with Yugoslav companies overseas.

Forty years on from leaving Yugoslavia, I was invited for a class reunion which was actually headed by one of my bullies, which I found offensive, and had written an open letter to be read out by one of my friendly classmates at the gathering. The feedback I had was that most were shocked and said why I did not ask for help. My friend asked them back “what help should he have asked for when you stood by watching him being beaten up?” The offender was very embarrassed and apologized to everyone and sent me a letter of apology leaning on his now reformed character.

Otherwise, I was a very happy kid in Yugoslavia; got on well with my education and what I have missed, I certainly made up with my education in England. I got involved with as many things that were offered with camping regularly with the *izviđači* all over the former Yugoslavia. At the camps in Kamenica, Poreč, Makarska, Zvornik, for instance, apart from school, I learned a lot about the Partisan struggles, Tito’s leadership, and all the offensives coupled with the regular “Partisan songs” etc. I was fully integrated into Yugoslav society and culture and the Yugoslav experience, although underneath there was a nationalistic drive. I remember many times of all the nationalities murmuring between themselves: “Čekaj, čekaj. Kad Tito umre onda ćemo se razračunati.” (“Wait, wait. When Tito dies, then we will settle accounts.”) Personally, I think that has to do more with anti-communism and socialism, although the old positions of the Serbs and Croats from the days of the Monarchy was never

⁹The national organization of scouts in Yugoslavia was founded after WWI and was a member of the World Organization of the Scout Movement 1922-1950; under the control of the communist regime it was revived as *Savez izviđača Jugoslavije (Scout Association of Yugoslavia)* in 1951; during socialist Yugoslavia scouts were much more reminiscent of the army, both in uniforms (olive green shirts and partisan hats were worn) and in training in which they forced areas such as rifle shooting, first aid, defense and protection; there were two units of scouts: *izviđači* (scouts) and *porečani* (scouts sailing on rivers).

been far away and the anti-Kosovo movement was very difficult for all the republics. It puzzles me that I never felt that there was an anti-Bosnian (Bošnjak) feeling at a level that eventually vented itself on the whole of Yugoslavia. The only thing I have encountered about the Bosnians is that everyone used them in funny anecdotes.

Both my sister and I were given Yugoslav citizenship which I never renounced. But I took British citizenship whilst holding on to my Yugoslav citizenship. I may be even entitled to Serbian citizenship.

I was on a business trip Novi Sad – Belgrade – Niš – Skopje – Sarajevo in 1992 when things really started to get out of hand. On the road, as I was approaching Sarajevo I saw some houses were burned down and other houses marked with white flags, which later on I understood the significance of. Coming near to Sarajevo, you could see the JNA¹⁰ mostly under command of paramilitary control and Republika Srpska. And by the time I arrived in Sarajevo, it could be seen that the city was surrounded and on the hill's howitzers were positioned. As usual, I stayed at the Holiday Inn Hotel, which by now in the large atrium was full of film crews and journalists. And in the smoked filled atmosphere and many under the influence of alcohol were waiting like vultures to see a bloody outcome!

I met my business friends in the Market Square offices, and we decided it would be best to head out of Sarajevo. So, one went to Belgrade, the other went to Rijeka, and I headed to Bihać. When I got out of Bosnia and Herzegovina I was stopped by the new Croatian security forces checkpoint and I was taken into an office for interrogation on suspicions that I was a spy. After a couple of hours, a major walked in to take over the interrogation. He has done some preliminary questioning and then suddenly started talking to me in Hungarian. This major turned out to be a 1956 Hungarian refugee who with his family escaped into Croatia. In his case, the family was very happy and easily integrated into the Yugoslav society in Zagreb. His father was a hydro engineer, his mother was a gynecologist, and after finishing university he decided to join the JNA and became a carrier army officer, and now he was part of the newly formed Croatian security forces (SJP - *Specijalne jedinice policije*). After a couple of hours of discussion in sharing our life experiences as refugees, I was free to go. I believe I was very lucky. Apart from him, I have not met anyone else who wanted to talk or could talk about 1956. He did not have anything bad to say about Yugoslavia, but he did side with the Croat ambitions. To my horror, when I arrived in Kranjska Gora, Slovenija, to my hotel Špik and turned on the TV- news, the reportage was showing the bombing of Sarajevo and in particular, the Holliday Inn where I stayed regularly until a couple of days ago, as well as the bombing of the Market Square offices where I was having a meeting.

¹⁰Jugoslovenska narodna armija (Yugoslav People's Army; founded as People's Liberation Army of Yugoslavia in 1941, renamed Yugoslav Army in 1945, the YPA since 1951), 1941-1992.

Additionally, there are some characters that I had discussions or rather I tried to discuss the Revolution with. My mother always evaded the discussion! My father was heavily involved with other revolutionaries who after arriving in Britain were involved with various anti-Hungarian communist activities internationally with the associated organization. I was not privy to that acceptance in the sharing of their achievements, many of which were brutal.

At age of eighteen, my aunt was heavily involved in happenings around the Radio Station and the ÁVO headquarters during the Revolution. She has seriously injured her legs and shoulders as she escaped crossing into Austria. She was strafed with machine-gun fire but managed to get across the border and was hospitalized for a couple of months. On her arrival in Britain, she joined the group above. I am sure you will have a good idea which agencies from the United Kingdom and the United States supported them. However, they kept things secret, and only occasionally when they drank too much you could get something out of them.

With the exception of my mother, they were all processed in Austria and they had no complaints. Yes, the holding camps in Austria were very crowded but had good accommodation, food, clothing, and sanitary facilities. All the holding camps were very busy processing them. I think Austrians were ready to receive the Hungarian refugees following the Second World War and many were invited to stay but many declined. The United States was heavily recruiting young men to join the U.S. Army.

One of my cardiac consultants in 2019 in our local hospital is a son of the 1956 refugee but could not speak any Hungarian nor remember what had happened. And I have met a number of people like him.

The United Kingdom has allowed many EU citizens to enter the country and in our local town, there are a couple of thousand Hungarians. I have employed quite a few, some have moved on and some have stayed friends (a younger generation than me) and they have a very positive attitude of the 1956 events. I feel equal respect from them without any negative feelings, so it seems that they have learned a better history of events and respect that in 1956 we had a common struggle which was not different from other historic and present-day events. Two nurses and a couple of doctors that I see in the hospital are Hungarians and, at one time, one or two of my caregivers were Hungarians.

Besides the Canadian branch of the UNHCR, do you remember any other organization that provided assistance to refugees at the time? And what is your experience with them?

The organizations that visited Geroovo were the UNHCR, Red Cross (Yugoslav representatives with Swiss representatives), and, of course, the Hungarian government representatives, who intimidated refugees with the tacit approval of representatives of the Yugoslav government and with the support of undercover Hungarian agents.

Did your family receive material or financial assistance from the Yugoslav state or from the other state or an organization while you were in Yugoslavia? Were your parents able to find a job? Did they work? If they worked, how were they treated at work?

My mother was given a cleaning job in the Town Hall and worked part-time as a seamstress for what she was trained for as a young girl. And later in life, she did very well in England working with Christian Dior and she made dresses for Princess Margaret, Deborah Kerr, and such like. I did not pay too much attention to those dresses. I now regret that. I should have done. No, we did not receive any financial help from the government of Yugoslavia or any other aid. My grandparents helped my mother financially and later they helped my sister to go to University along with my parents from England. I was left to my own devices, as my father said to me one day, "learn to live on an iceberg". I was on my own at sixteen to fight my way through life.

You said you left Yugoslavia because your parents did not want you to serve in the Yugoslav army. Was your parents' decision to leave Yugoslavia influenced by anything else? Where there any other reasons, political or economic? Did they feel that integration was not going in the right direction?

I was very happy in Yugoslavia and I would have been very proud to serve in the JNA. One of my uncles was a pilot in the Yugoslav Air Force. I was going to join the Yugoslav Air Force too. He already had sponsored me, and I believe when I was seventeen I was going to be joining the Air Academy. Also, at that time Yugoslavia was in a good place and the future looked bright.

But you must have been wondering, and asking yourself, where is my father!?! Well out of the blue in early 1962 he contacted my mother! We heard nothing of him since that night in Kučevo in June/July of 1957 and my mother was convinced that he was either executed or has been imprisoned and sent to somewhere like Goli Otok. We found out from his own account that he was taken to Belgrade headquarters for interrogation by the Udba. They gave him a gun to shoot himself or within 24 hours find a country to take him. He asked if he could be put in contact with the British which they arranged and on that same day that he was interviewed by the British he was taken to Austria where he was processed. The Udba did tell him: we know who you are and we know that you have saved a Partisan in Senta, who saved your life north of Belgrade, and for that reason, you were allowed to go free and were told never to return and we are telling you again never to return; no harm will come to your wife or children, they will be given protection by the Yugoslav government. Other than this I do not know anything else about the circumstances especially as I could not get on with my father due to my beliefs about the War and when we arrived in England, shortly after I joined the Air Force Cadets (I got a Flying scholarship and eventually became a pilot, but that is another story) where I suppose we were indoctrinated about the War even more and I had a conflict with him, and we were estranged until his death.

For many years, the Lady's story puzzled me, and I could not get my mother to talk about it, or any other relative. So, one day on one of my business trips to Yugoslavia I set about finding my father's former fiancée and I did find her. When she opened the door and looked at me she nearly fainted as I reminded her of my father. I spent the day with her and she collaborated on the story. By the end of the war, she was a highly decorated Partisan and was a captain. She was still in love with my father and never married. They grew up together from a very young age. And they were together a lot shepherding the herds of cattle together for the local landowner. Sadly, she died not long after.

We left for England in July 1962 and, unfortunately, my father's behavior was reckless towards my mother. With my and help from others, my mother got divorced and returned to Yugoslavia with my sister in 1964. My mother could not get a job and whilst she was in England she made contact with Christian Dior House and some other famous dress designers and returned to England. My sister decided to stay with my grandparents in Yugoslavia. She went to University and became a multilingual translator for the local government in English, Serbian and Hungarian. She eventually married a JNA general who became minister of defense in the government of Vojvodina. Their daughter is a teacher at the school where we went. For tragic reasons, after my mother's death, we no longer have anything to do with each other despite our shared turbulent lives.

My mother, after many years in England where she had done very well and had a beautiful home, decided to go back to her father's house in Yugoslavia in 1986. She inherited that house and had it beautifully renovated and modernized. She died tragically of dementia in 2010 and her resting place is with her parents in Vojvodina.

There is one thing that my mother was saddened by on her return to Yugoslavia and in particular when Yugoslavia collapsed. In the shops and offices, Hungarian was always spoken, the inscriptions were also in Serbian and Hungarian and then, one day, only in Serbian and Cyrillic. So where for generations there was easy cohesion between the main ethnic groups this has eroded and changed, and Hungarians feel oppressed. I just hope that it does not lead to something more serious in the future.

My father had a common-law Hungarian wife with whom I and my family got on well, and, after my rift with father, we continued our relationship till she died. We buried my father in 1991 in London where most of the attendees at his funeral were old revolutionaries.

Lastly, words about myself. I had struggled to educate myself by becoming a trainee electronics engineer which I did with support from the Government and the company I worked for and additionally went to night school. I got qualified. Eventually, I built up a successful business which ended in a disaster in a ruinous marriage which I finished and got divorced. Then I met a wonderful lady and started all over again and built up several businesses. Ironically, I ended up working in USSR and

then in Russia for many years and have done very well and made a number of good friends, some with whom I have been friends for decades. I have now been married for 40 years. All my children went through University with high scores. I have two daughters, one is a managing director of a British company in China now for seven years, the other is a high ranking officer in the RAF Royal Air Force (one granddaughter) and a son (a grandson and a granddaughter) who is managing director of our family businesses and his family live in their own house on our farm and we have two fostered sons with five kids and a fostered Russian daughter with one child. My wife and I are in our twilight years but we are very happy. We enjoy our beautiful gardens and our son's family, trying to catch up on lost time. I write my memoirs for my family, discover my ancestors from the 1800s, and battle with a troubled history of our Eastern European and Balkan people's lives. I try to understand and rationalize what we have done, what we have allowed happen to all of us, where we are of the same heart and yet millions of our families have suffered unspeakable tragedies. My homeland will always be a pain in my heart and mind and it hurts that I have had to find a home in a foreign land.

What to say about the Revolution? Eventually, I have arrived at a happy place, but the pain and the turmoil have never left me. Writing these notes has turned my life upside down but at least it has given me the opportunity to write it down for my kids and these events and all the events in my life I will write down in a manuscript and I hope they will learn something from it. The pain has not gone – one day you are happy in your home and then suddenly it is all gone with your rabbits, horses, school, friends, everything and the only thing you have is the clothes that you wear and no future. However, I am very mindful that there are so many others who have experienced a worse fate than me.

Did you stay in a connection with anyone from Yugoslavia?

I have one very good school friend, a historian dealing with the history of Vojvodina. He and his wife have visited us regularly, he is Hungarian, and she is Serbian. I stayed in touch with some of my cousins but due to health issues, we do not see each other. Some of my cousins have married into Serb families; some are in Serbia, Germany, Italy, and the United States. Some of them do not speak Hungarian anymore. But luckily I speak Serbian, although it is fading and sometimes my Russian interferes with it, I try to separate it.

I believe the biggest problem with the Hungarian refugees was that Tito did not want to upset the Russians in fear that they may want to get a grip on Yugoslavia, as Stalin tried in the Second World War when the Soviets assumed that the Red Army liberated Yugoslavia. It was not so. Throughout the war, it was the British in the main along with the Canadians that helped the Partisans and Tito promptly told Stalin to take the Red Army out of Yugoslavia. Tito also did not want to upset the Hungarian communists and he was in collusion with them to return all Hungarian refugees.

Finally, the plight of the refugees was about money. Where has all the money gone from the UNHCR, the Red Cross, and of all the other international donors that have given to Yugoslavia for the welfare of the Hungarian refugees and for their expenses for the relatively short period that the refugees stayed in Yugoslavia? Where did all the aid money go? It certainly did not go to the refugee welfare.¹¹

And in conclusion, part of me has been left in Yugoslavia despite the misery of the Gerovo prison and the camps, hunger, filth, cold, etc. Yugoslavia will always be part of my life. I will carry Yugoslavia in my soul for all the good memories of the many people I met during my stay and the people that I have met in my business days.

I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to share with you a part of my journey. I feel that we share the same heartbeat. Thank you!

Thank you, Mr. Harcsa.

¹¹ Yugoslavia, as one of the two countries that had accepted refugees from Hungary, experienced a heavy financial burden which it was unable to support in full. According to available archival sources the UNHCR was ready to reimburse all Yugoslav expenses, which particularly pleased the hosts. At the meeting of the Executive Committee of the UNREF, held in the beginning of February 1957, it was decided that contributions for Hungarian refugees were to be used as aid for both Austria and Yugoslavia, but it took time for that aid to reach Yugoslavia. In mid-March, by the decision of the Yugoslav Federal Government, the Ministry of Internal Affairs took out a loan from the National Bank of 3,000,000,000 dinars (approx. US\$5,000,000) with a 6% interest rate. The intention was to use this amount to finance accommodation and care for the refugees. A survey of the number of Hungarian refugees, conducted at the time by the Federal Government, estimated a US\$2,000,000 expense for the time period from March 1 to July 1. Therefore, it is evident why the Ministry was in need of the above-mentioned loan. Fortunately, at this time the daily expense per refugee dropped from US\$3 to US\$1 because, in the meantime, the provisioning and food expenses dropped, because of the aid from the International Red Cross and other international organisations. In the first half of 1957 the expenses were US\$5,756,763, while the estimate for the second half of the year exceeded the amount of US\$8,000,000. By the middle of 1957 the United Nations had reimbursed only 7.4% of the Yugoslav expenses. Financial compensation to Yugoslavia remained as the central problem regarding the Hungarian refugees almost a whole year after their resettlement and was finally solved by the help of the State Department and the Canadian Government early in 1959.

Резиме

Др Катарина Ковачевић

Врло лично путовање кроз недавну прошлост: Интервју са Јаношем Харчом

Слом мађарског устанка 1956. године проузроковао је велики избеглички талас ка Западу. Своје домове је напустио близу 200.000 људи. Највећи део избеглица је у новембру и децембру 1956. прешао у Аустрију. Када је совјетским тенковима аустријско-мађарска граница затворена, око 20.000 избеглица је у току прве половине 1957. године пребегло у Југославију. Пошто је збрињавање избеглица превазилазило капацитете транзитних држава, Високи комесаријат за избеглице Уједињених нација, Међународни комитет за европске миграције и друге националне и интернационалне хуманитарне организације брзо су узеле учешће у пружању помоћи мађарским породицама и појединцима. Ова координирана међународна акција, прва такве врсте у историји, постигла је изванредан успех и знатно утицала на развој међународних институција активних на пољу хуманитарног рада.

Међу мађарским породицама које су нашле привремено уточиште у Југославији, задесила се и породица Јаноша Харче. Искуство осмогодишњег дечака, његов доживљај Герова, највећег избегличког кампа у Југославији у то време, смештеног у хрватском планинском подручју изнад Ријеке, као и однос југословенских власти и становништва према избеглицима главна су тема разговора са господином Харчом. Његове узбудљиве успомене потврђују и допуњују сазнања добијена из архивских извора, али се не односе само на избегличке дане, већ представљају и драгоцену сведочанство о турбулентним временима и испреплетаним судбинама на простору некадашње Југославије.