

Magda Czigány  
*"Just Like Other Students": Reception of the  
1956 Hungarian Refugee Students in Britain*

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The author of this book is a former student at the University of Szeged who, as an elected member of the University Revolutionary Committee, participated actively in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Together with thousands of other university students, she escaped from Hungary in mid-November, in the wake of the crushing Soviet military intervention. Czigány reveals clearly her political convictions by linking her decision to emigrate not just to the fear of reprisal, were she to stay, but also to a desire to flee "the all-pervasive slavery of communist ideology and practice" (1) and "to start a new life without lies and fear" (11).

Many of these young Hungarians nourished a good dose of bitterness and anger towards the West for its passiveness towards the Soviet Union in November 1956. Furthermore, they faced many daunting challenges in their new land of adoption: their inability, at first, to communicate verbally with their generous and compassionate hosts—a problem that was remedied through the initiation of intensive English language courses, as early as January 1957; the inevitable culture shock, from food and a diversified press to the London's yellow smog; a sense of isolation and loneliness, somewhat attenuated by the comfort provided by their own little Hungarian community—one, incidentally, that included co-nationals who had been living in Great Britain before 1956; and totally different teaching methods, with students expected to form their own opinions without the ideological crutches provided by their teachers. (Incidentally, should not so many challenges lead at least a few readers to conclude that they were *not* "just like other students"?). Nevertheless, though they lived through trying times, a good majority of them completed their studies successfully—a happy ending that attests to their intelligence and their determination.

The emphasis here—and such an approach will likely disappoint some readers—is clearly on the administrative side of the story, in particular the careful and meticulous work of many committees. These dealt with, among other things, the transport of students from their refugee camps in Vienna to Great Britain, the complex question of university entrance requirements; the assessment of all available places as well as the allocation of students to British technical colleges and universities; and the estimates for the cost of their maintenance throughout their studies. The latter became a burden assumed by the generous contributions of many different donors: individuals, towns and municipalities, companies and, naturally, institutions of higher education.

What is missing in this monograph are more life stories of the Hungarians themselves and, in particular, of their impact on the British people, who welcomed them so kindly. (This reviewer, who was in Grade 5 in a small and sleepy Québec village when, in the Spring of 1957, two young Hungarians—Zoltán Bárdos and Gábor Rakowski—joined his classmates for a few too brief weeks, still remembers vividly how they both impacted his young life). Finally, since only around 500 university students, out of more than 7000 who left Hungary, chose Great Britain as their new residence, a comparative approach with those who opted for West Germany, France, and the USA, for example, would have added yet another dimension to an already interesting study—one that is based on extensive archival research and interviews with former refugee students.