

Hungary and the Refugee Question. 1914-2015

In the last hundred years Hungary had to face four waves of migration. Each wave was a consequence of war situation or political crisis which took place in the neighborhood of the country or in remote lands.

During World War I tens of thousands of Jewish refugees from Galicia entered into Hungary to find shelter here until their home was liberated by the army of Austria-Hungary.

In the fall of 1939 minimum 140 thousand refugees entered Hungary together with the units of the defeated Polish army to find peace here or/and to gain strength to continue fight against Nazi Germany.

Fifty years later, in the summer of 1989 thousands of citizens of the „German Democratic Republic” moved to Hungary in the hope that the new reformist Hungarian government let them go to Germany via Austria.

Last year hundreds of thousands refugees from the Middle East and from Afghanistan crossed the Hungarian border in their way to Western Europe mainly to Germany and Sweden.

In my presentation I would like to compare the policies of the Hungarian government toward the refugees in the mentioned cases. I would like to present how refugees were received in Hungary in the last hundred years.

The flow of refugees began in the fall of 1914. They were Jews from Galicia, the territory which were occupied by the advancing Russian army. Refugees from Galicia were Austrian citizens, but a significant part of them were looking shelter not in Austria but in Hungary. According to many records and memoirs they were better received in Budapest than in Vienna. Refugees received financial assistance from the Hungarian government and also from the Jewish community. In 1915 greater part of refugees were transported to Bohemia but new waves of Jewish refugees reached Hungary in 1916 and in 1917. The financial assistance of refugees was a great burden for the Hungarian state, therefore refugees were encouraged to work. Rabbis and scientists, scholars were employed by the Jewish community.

The presence of Jewish refugees was not a political issue in the first years of the war. That situation changed dramatically at the end of 1917, when these Jews became the number one target of growing anti-Semitic campaign. A new era began in the history of the Hungarian Jewish community. Growing burden of the war, frustration, disappointment, moral and physical attrition obviously contributed to that change.

At the time of the German-Soviet invasion against Poland the Polish-Hungarian border remained open. Military units crossed the borders were disarmed and interned. 141 military camps were set up, mainly in factory buildings, and in schools. But most of the camps had to be closed, since majority of soldiers went on with the goal of joining Polish units in France or in the Middle East. The government treated the Polish civilian refugees

like foreign visitors. They were free to move in the country. Those who needed assistance were housed in camps provided for by the Hungarian state. Civilians were greeted warmly by the Hungarian population. Various non-profit groups, Red Cross, Polish-Hungarian society, churches and individuals eagerly provided help to the refugees.

1989 was the year of transition. Post-communist, reformist government led the country towards greater democracy and economic freedom. Demand for freedom was gaining strength in East Germany as well, but the communist government neglected the demands for change. In response, thousands of East Germans –traveling as “tourists”– began pouring into Hungary. As soon as they arrived, they declared that they would not return home.

The East German refugees hoped to cross from Hungary into Austria and then into West Germany where, by law, they would be granted citizenship. In the past, Hungary had refused to allow East Germans to proceed to Austria. But in 1989 as Hungary moved toward a more democratic political system, more and more refugees from other communist countries –not just East Germany– poured into the country seeking refuge. Foreign Minister Gyula Horn declared, “We cannot become a country of refugee camps.” He announced that Hungary would allow the nearly 8,000 East Germans in Hungary to leave for West Germany. Here I have to mention, that Hungarian public had a great sympathy with East German refugees. Various charity movements turned up, tens of thousands of Hungarians collected food and clothes for East Germans who received temporary shelter in parishes.

As we saw, in the past Hungary received well the refugees who looked for temporary asylum in the country. That tradition was disrupted last year, when hundreds of thousands of migrants crossed Hungary in their way to Western Europe.

The policy of the government was not consistent. Sometimes the government allowed for the migrants to cross the country as soon as possible. Other times the flow of refugees was blocked for days, even for weeks. Government tried to follow the regulations of the Dublin Convention and tried to register refugees but when the country was overburdened by migrants, authorities stopped registration. Dublin Convention is based on the principle that the first (EU) member state refugees reached is responsible for either accepting or rejecting asylum, and the seeker may not restart the process in another member state. Taking finger prints was part of the process as well, however most refugees refused to give finger prints and did not cooperate with the Hungarian authorities. They feared if they apply asylum in the first EU member state they enter, they will not be eligible for asylum in the country they wanted to settle, namely Germany and Sweden.

In the fall 2015, Hungarian authorities gave up the enforcement of registration of refugees to such an extent that even buses were sent to the Croatian-Hungarian border to transfer them as soon as possible to Austria.

The whole refugee issue was accompanied by a massive anti-migrant propaganda campaign which was triggered and conducted by the government.

This campaign reminded me on another campaign which was made during World War I against refugees from Galicia. I think that it is reasonable to draw parallel between the reception of the refugees during World War I. and the reception of migrants last year. It is also important to compare the anti-refugee campaigns which unfolded in both cases.

Although a whole century passed between the two events, there is striking resemblance between the elements of the two campaigns.

Both campaigns were built on prejudice.

Anti-Semitism existed before WWI, but it was not a mainstream attitude. In the liberal era Jewish migrants were welcome, and Jews were considered and registered as Hungarians. In this era anti-Semitism targeted a special group of Jews. This group included those who recently entered into Hungary from Eastern territories. These „Eastern” Jews were called Galicianers. These Yiddish speaking Galicianers who preserved their traditional life style embodied everything which was considered negative. They were considered religious bigots who exploited poor peasants in the north-eastern part of Hungary especially in Carpathoruthenia. In World War I refugees who entered Hungary were Jews who belonged to this group. Their arrival gradually re-vitalized prejudices, and then deepened the hostile attitude.

At present in the mind of many Hungarians Islam and Arabic peoples are connected with religious bigotry and terrorism. This attitude is especially widespread in some Christian communities which have been speaking on the threat of Islam for long time.

Both refugee groups were easy to recognize. Jews wore their traditional clothes: kaftan, and fur cup. Refugees from the Middle-East and from Afghanistan had oriental appearance. Women from these regions often wore „burka” and hijab.

There were many similarities among the charges which were brought against the „unwanted aliens”.

According to the most frequently voiced accusations refugees were parasites and untrustworthy and they did not deserve either financial assistance or our sympathy. But the most weird charge was that the refugees, migrants came here to take the jobs of Hungarians, and to conquer the country.

Since the Jews from Galicia received financial assistance from the government they were considered to be taking advantage of the government. If they worked as street vendors they were called profiteers who became rich at the expense of ordinary Hungarians.

Last year the pro-government segment of the media often underlined how great burden was for the government providing temporary shelter for migrants. /This charge was baseless since Hungary received assistance from the EU to treat the refugees in human way./ Since many refugees had cell phone, news began to circulate that migrants were not eligible for any kind of assistance because they must had been rich if they could afford to have sophisticated technical devices.

Jewish refugees from Galicia were accused of falsifying documents, especially birth certificates in order to remain in Hungary. This charge was also made against refugees from the Middle East.

The presence of both refugee groups was evaluated/considered by a significant part of the media and by the main part of the political elite, as mortal danger for the nation.

Politicians, journalists, leading intellectuals said and wrote that presence of refugees was a danger for the stability of the country, since it was impossible to integrate these alien groups. These aliens do not want to assimilate, in addition they were asocial, and they did not respect the law.

Both refugee groups were charged with collaboration with the enemy. Jewish refugees were charged with conducting espionage for the enemy, namely the advancing Russian army. /The accusation, that Jews collaborated with the enemy returned during the WWII, and even during the Cold War./ Refugees from the Middle East were presented in the media as potential or real terrorists. Hungarian government shared this attitude.

But the most serious charge was that the Jewish refugees as well as the refugees from the Middle East came here to conquer the country. Dozens articles published in the last war year, wrote about Jews from Galicia who occupied houses of peasants who lost their lives on the battle fields. This charge against the "Eastern Jews" was repeated on daily basis in the House of Representatives. Members of the parliament independently from religious affiliation agreed that refugees should be repatriated to Galicia.

Refugees from the Middle East were often portrayed in the media and also by politicians as aggressive immigrants who would take our jobs and who would try to Islamize not only Hungary but whole of Europe.

These charges were absurd. The number of Jewish refugees was low, and immigration stopped in 1918. Most of the Jews who came from Galicia and from other eastern territories left Hungary or wanted to leave Hungary for Germany or for the USA.

Refugees from Middle East did not come here to settle either. Contrary, they did their best to leave the country as soon as possible. Even those persecuted Arab Christians left who arrived in Hungary with the assistance of the Hungarian government and who were assisted to settle in Hungary.

How did the government in World War I and the current government try to solve the refugee problem?

Hundred years ago until 1918 the government tried to mitigate tension, to cool sentiments stirred up by various papers and political groups. Finally prime minister Sandor Wekerle in order to channel anger and frustration which found expression in anti-Semitism launched a campaign against the alien Jews. In August 1918 he ordered police raids to find and to arrest alien Jews in cities, where strong Orthodox communities lived. Raids turned to atrocities in some places and these roundups foreshadowed the campaign against "alien" Jews in the interwar period.

Current government built a fence to stop migration.

In addition to direct actions, both political elite built up an ideology to support their campaigns against the unwanted aliens.

At the end of the war and in the twenties and in the thirties this term “Galicianers” included in practice not only those who arrived in Hungary during war years, but those also, whose descendants arrived from the Eastern territories. These Jews became scapegoats for Hungary’s defeat in World War I and for the first short-lived Communist dictatorship in 1919.

The „Jews from Galicia” became unwanted Jews in Hungary. The demand to the expel of them (Jews from Galicia) remained a major issue in the political life in the interwar years.

These “Eastern Jews” became the first victims of the Holocaust in Hungary. In the summer of 1941 Hungarian authorities deported 22 thousand “Eastern Jews” to occupied Soviet territories.

The current government re-vitalized the theory which was born in the 16th century, that **Hungary was the bulwark of Europe and Christianity. It is Hungary’s historical mission to defend Europe against Tartars, against Ottoman Empire, and now against the armies of migrants.** Hungary fulfills its historical mission with the construction of the fence along the Southern border.

Some critics of the government advocated for tolerant attitude towards the migrants, on the basis, that hundreds of thousands of Hungarians became also refugees after the suppression of 1956 revolution and Hungarian refugees were well received in the Western hemisphere. Government however refuses any parallel between the situation in 1956 and the current migrant-crisis on the basis, that Hungarian refugees did their best to integrate into the societies of their new homes while Syrian, and Afghan refugees are not willing to follow the law and the habits of their host countries. State officials and state controlled media speak on war between cultures. If Hungary fails to defend itself and Europe, Islam will rule over the whole continent. There is a paradox here however. While the government speaks of the defense of the West, it criticizes vehemently the policy of the European Union in general and refuses such European values as liberalism and multiculturalism. Theory of conspiracy also became an integral part of the anti-migrant rhetoric. According to it migrants were invited to Hungary and to Europe by multinational capital and the left-wingers of the world to ruin nation states.

The reception of refugees is a barometer of the state of a country. History, namely the studied examples teach us that when a nation has high self-esteem, feels itself strong and is confident in its future, it will be generous, to those who look for temporary shelter in its land. This was the case in the first half of World War I. when the armies of the Monarchy were victorious and also in the fall of 1939 when the country re-gained parts of the lost territories. This was the situation in 1989 when on the ruins of Communism the whole nation expected a much better future. When hopes are not fulfilled, when the nation is not successful, optimism is replaced by frustration and disappointment. In these times rejection of the “other” get stronger and people are more likely accept easy and hostile explanations.

