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Sheena Trimble

Shaping Destinies: Women and the Hungarian Refugee Movement to Canada (1956–1958)

Introduction

The Hungarian uprising in the fall of 1956 and the fate of some 200,000 refugees who fled the country following brutal suppression by Soviet forces captivated the attention of Canadian women along with the rest of the world. Canadian advocates of refugee relief found the Liberal government's initial response of simply giving priority to Hungarian immigration applications half-hearted. Those advocating more forceful action sparked a public outcry, taken up by the press and opposition parties. For days, the minister of citizenship and immigration, J. W. Pickersgill, adhered to his department's "gatekeeper" role before finally bowing to pressure (Dirks 193–99; Donaghy 264–67). On November 23, 1956 he sought Cabinet approval to simplify admission procedures and charter aircraft to bring refugees to Canada (DMCI¹, Pickersgill). The movement began in earnest five days later when Pickersgill announced that the Canadian government would bear the cost of transport. By the end of 1958 37,566 Hungarian refugees had been admitted, marking a watershed in Canada's refugee policy (Canada, Parliament, 28 Nov. 1956, 111; "Hungarian Refugee Movement" 1–2, 4). The Hungarians were the first group of refugees admitted in such large numbers in such a short period of time, facilitated by favorable government policies and widespread mobilization within Canadian society (Dreisziger, "Biggest Welcome" 42).

A rich historiography has examined this migration from a range of perspectives, but an analysis of women's actions and attitudes represents an uncharted approach. It has the potential to call into question stereotypical representations of 1950s Canadian women as being singularly preoccupied with domesticity, maternity, and consumerism (Strong-Boag 315–19). Indeed, archival research reveals that Canadian women expressed opinions and took on a variety of roles related to this remarkable migration. Examining those opinions and roles not only offers a novel perspective on Canada's response to the Hungarian refugee crisis, but it also provides insights into the evolving positioning of women in Canadian society.

The 1956 refugee movement replicated the male-female imbalance that had been typical of the smaller waves of Hungarian immigrants that arrived at the turn of the century, during the interwar period and as displaced persons following World War II (Patrias 4–7, 10–12, 20–21). By the 1951 census, the male-female ratio had finally

1 Deputy Minister of Citizenship and Immigration fonds.

been reduced to 1 female for every 1.2 males (Dominion Bureau of Statistics, table 32, 1). Still, the weight of intersectionality—the imbrication of two or more subaltern identities (Nakano Glenn 105), woman and ethnic minority in this case—often muted the voices of women of Hungarian origin when it came to expressing their opinions about the admission of the 1956 refugees. Among the refugees, women were clearly in the minority; in 1957 one female refugee was admitted to Canada for every 1.74 males (Kalbach 48). Yet women were accorded a symbolic power that played an important role in the movement.

Historians tend to chronicle the activism regarding Hungarian refugee admission in an anonymous way that provides little information about the individuals involved (Dirks 194–97; Patrias 23–24; Dreisziger, “Toward a Golden Age” 204). Passing references to women can be found in some works, but these provide only snippets of information on women’s roles or attitudes. Susan M. Papp’s 1986 article on “Hungarian Immigrant Women” reserves only two paragraphs for the 1956 refugees (44). The published autobiographies of four refugee women serve as important primary sources (Grossman; Kende; Romvary; Verrall). Oral history collections developed by the Multicultural History Society of Ontario and the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 contribute additional testimonies of transition to life in Canada. By drawing upon these sources, as well as the archives of the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, welfare organizations and women’s associations, this chapter provides insights into Canadian women’s views on their country’s response to the refugee crisis and their actions in support of, or in opposition to, refugee admission. Meanwhile, the accounts of Hungarian refugee women demonstrate that, despite their precarious situation, they found ways to exercise their agency to achieve their desired admission and settlement outcomes.

Facilitating admission, reception, and settlement

On November 6, 1956, just two days after Soviet tanks rolled into Budapest, the Catholic Women’s League of Canada sent a letter to Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent expressing “deep admiration for the people of Hungary in their struggle for freedom against a foreign oppressor and urg[ing] that every possible aid be given to alleviate their sufferings” (PCO, Catholic Women’s). The significant Catholic presence among earlier Hungarian immigrants and strong anti-communist sentiment undoubtedly impelled the league to action. Other women’s associations may not have had the same sectarian motivations, but support for the refugees’ rejection of communist tyranny was widespread. As the days and weeks passed, the Canadian Federation of University Women, the Women’s Division of the United Nations Association of Canada, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, the National Council of Women of Canada, the Women’s Missionary Society of the United Church of Canada, and individual women communicated their support for admitting Hungarian refugees

(McLean 3; Local Council of Women of Toronto 2; Department of External Affairs; Atkinson). The desire to help the refugees once they arrived was so profound that a plethora of voluntary organizations engaged in intense activity in many host cities (DMCI, Manion). The fact that countless women and women's associations involved themselves in the reception and settlement of Hungarian refugees would also have been interpreted by the federal government as endorsement of their admission.

The Department of Citizenship and Immigration was responsible, to a certain degree, for the multiplicity of actors involved in receiving the Hungarian refugees. It organized a meeting on November 27, 1956 with representatives of national voluntary agencies, Hungarian Canadian organizations, and the government of Ontario to ensure that the voluntary sector and the provinces would help shoulder the burden of refugee reception and settlement. According to the meeting's minutes (2-3, 9), civil society was to be tapped in unprecedented ways: "the Department . . . made it clear that it was willing to utilize the services of anyone . . . willing to receive and care for a refugee or a refugee family even if only for a short time." Among the thirty-four people present at the meeting only four were women, representing the Canadian Welfare Council (Marion Murphy), the Canadian Hungarian Relief Committee (Peggy Jennings), and the department's Citizenship Branch. Murphy and Jennings expressed concerns that the department's scenario would place a heavy financial burden on homes and voluntary agencies. The deputy minister, Laval Fortier, claimed that the department's limited funds meant that "[t]he only possible solution . . . was to recruit socially-minded persons in Canada to receive and care for the refugees." He responded in a similar vein to Murphy's query as to whether government funding would be made available to help hard-pressed social agencies hire additional staff to meet refugee needs. Fortier claimed that church groups could be used to "develop offers to receive and care for the refugees without the special establishment of a costly government agency" (6, 8).

Having agreed to pay for refugee transport, the department sought to save on all other budget lines. This implied relying heavily upon women's contributions, through their voluntary work and by opening their homes to refugees. Even professional women, a significant portion of the staff of social welfare agencies, were expected to take on extra work with little prospect of additional staff being hired to help with the increased workload. For Fortier, the solution lay in distributing the burden among multiple sources of voluntary assistance (2, 9). Government officials and non-profit representatives alike emphasized the need for coordination. Regional citizenship liaison officers would contact interested organizations at the local level to promote the establishment of "coordinating committees." Constance Hayward, a liaison officer based in Ottawa, was to oversee the work of the officers in the regions. Two other women, Charity Grant in Toronto and Françoise Marchand in Montréal, were among the regional citizenship liaison officers involved (4-5, 8).

A memorandum of 6 December 1956 (DMCI, McCarthy 2-3) outlined the framework for coordination between the department's citizenship and immigration branches

while underscoring the preeminence of the latter. The Citizenship Branch was to encourage coordinating committees “to assist” officers of the Immigration Branch by meeting trains, finding accommodation, and distributing “creature comforts.” The female liaison officers and the volunteer and professional women who became the backbone of the coordinating committees were thus cast in the role of helpmate to the almost exclusively male immigration officers, “self-made men” who had few qualms about expecting more highly-educated women liaison officers and social workers to follow their lead (Hawkins 337, 96–97).² The Catholic Women’s League’s 1957 annual report provided a typical list of the accessory and gendered tasks that voluntary women were to perform:

Each Province [sic] reports meeting trains, work at clothing depots, assistance with housing, furnishing and employment and social assistance. Christmas parties, showers, entertainment and providing of wedding receptions with cake, outfitting of bride, etc. The spiritual side was not neglected. Religious articles were distributed, arrangements were made for special Masses, transportation to church provided. (Panaro 83)

The case of the Canadian Welfare Council’s Committee on the Welfare of Immigrants

The role of the Canadian Welfare Council, a national, non-profit organization, in the Hungarian refugee movement is of particular interest because of the sizeable representation of women on its staff and advisory committees. Its Committee on the Welfare of Immigrants (CWI), created in 1954 to assemble national organizations with an interest in “the adjustment of immigrants,” was no exception (CWI, “Committee,” 17 March 1957). In early 1957, Phyllis Burns, an experienced social worker and educator (Harris and Beals 22), became the Director of Welfare Services for the council as well as secretary for the Committee on the Welfare of Immigrants. Burns quickly went to work organizing a special meeting between committee members and government representatives to discuss the Hungarian refugee crisis. Local welfare councils and social agencies had been conveying concerns about challenges at their level and it was thought the committee could facilitate “co-operation between public and private services” and seek “clarification on present policy or the development of new policies” (CWI, 14 Jan. 1957, 2). Burns’s background information for the meeting (CWI, Burns, 10 Jan. 1957, 1–4) pinpointed the Department of Citizenship and Immigration policies considered unbecoming the needs and “dignity” of the refugees: housing them in private homes rather than government-financed hostels and providing financial

² Hayward (Knowles 210), Grant (Armstrong-Reid and Murray 345), and Marchand (Bourbeau 101) all had two university degrees.

assistance in the form of vouchers rather than cash and only as a “last resort.” Of the thirty-two participants in the meeting of January 14 fifteen were women, representing voluntary associations, welfare agencies, and government (Constance Hayward). Bessie Touzel of the Ontario Welfare Council argued that refugees should have the option of staying in hostels, but Fortier continued to assert that private homes were a better solution because they acclimated refugees to “the Canadian way of life” (5-6).

A second special meeting, scheduled for February 25, was preceded by a memorandum from Burns (CWI, Burns, 22 Jan. 1957, 1-2) outlining concerns raised during consultations with coordinating committees across the country: a diminishing supply of free housing, refugees arriving in communities with limited employment opportunities, and a need to clarify roles between “public officials” and “citizen groups.” Of the twenty-nine representatives of social and voluntary agencies and local coordinating committees who attended the meeting, fifteen were women (CWI, 25 Jan. 1957, 1). The absence of government observers allowed for a freer exchange of views and frank criticism of the Department of Citizenship and Immigration’s policies, including its miserly approach to providing financial assistance, its refusal to acknowledge the benefits of hostels, and its preoccupation with immediate employment rather than finding the “right job for the refugee” (3, 6, 8-9). Grace Hartman of Sudbury’s Hungarian Relief Committee reported that several refugees sent to her city had left for Toronto as soon as they had made enough money. Refugee trepidations about life in small cities were matched by some vexation with the refugees themselves. Hartman referred to grumblings in Sudbury that presaged criticisms that slowly began to gain ground across Canada based on the idea that “too much [was] being provided for Hungarians giving them a false idea of their own responsibilities” (3, 7).

At the conclusion of the meeting, it was decided that a letter would be sent to Minister Pickersgill to seek clarification on certain policies. The committee also recommended that the minister be informed of “[t]he need for more direction and control in the treatment of Hungarians who [were] confused by the complete freedom . . . accorded to them in contrast to what they [had] been accustomed to” (11-12). Jean Henshaw, of the Montréal Travellers’ Aid Society, undoubtedly played a role in making this recommendation as she expressed similar sentiments in a November letter (CWI, Henshaw). Citing her thirteen years of work with postwar immigrants, including thirty months in displaced persons camps, she felt well-qualified to offer this reductionist interpretation. Historian Nandor F. Dreisziger’s assessment that the Hungarian refugees had grown accustomed to a system that placed them in jobs and housing, paid for vacations, and provided free education and medical treatment does, however, give some credence to her observations (“Refugee Experience” 72-73).

Joseph Kage, Jean-Baptiste Lanctot, Dorothy Gregg, Henshaw, and Burns prepared the letter for Minister Pickersgill and had it sent on March 12, 1957 (CWI, McCutcheon 1-6; CWI, 8 Apr. 1957, 2). His response revealed an unwillingness to adopt what the committee saw as best practices in social welfare when it came to providing adequate financial assistance, housing immigrants in hostels, or placing them in

suitable employment (CWI, Pickersgill 1-7). Although disappointed with the minister's response, the committee concluded that government had at least recognized the value of a public-private partnership in the "field of immigration" (CWI, 8 Apr. 1957, 2, 5). Another decade would elapse, however, before the Department of Citizenship and Immigration would develop more openness to the advice of social welfare experts and the women who made up their ranks (Hawkins 170, 322).

Assessing women's roles in receiving the refugees

Although the Committee on the Welfare of Immigrants had limited success in convincing the Department of Citizenship and Immigration to adopt some of its recommended measures, it remained an important player in the relationship between government and non-profit actors. Using its access to senior government officials, the committee kept up the pressure to clarify roles between the two sectors and to implement best practices in social welfare. It also served as a conduit between coordinating committees and senior department officials, thus serving as an alternative source of information to front-line immigration officers. In functioning at almost complete parity, the committee provided an important national tribune for women involved in refugee reception and settlement. Traditional women activists—members of women's organizations—were among the initial members, but the Hungarian refugee movement brought more professional welfare workers onto the committee (CWI, 29 Oct. 1957, 1; CWI, "Expected Attendance 29 October 1957" n.d.). This mirrored what was happening at the local level where almost all the coordinating committees included the participation of welfare councils. Since women's longstanding predominance in the charitable welfare sector was matched by their predominance in its professional version, the welfare councils were usually represented by professional women (CWI, Address List, n.d. [1957] 1-2; CWI, Dyson 1-2). Phyllis Burns was perhaps the epitome of the new face of immigrant welfare services. As an experienced and respected social worker, she provided critical support and information for the Committee on the Welfare of Immigrants and interacted with senior immigration officials on a relatively equal footing. That she had gained the respect of the department was demonstrated in August 1957 when the new minister of citizenship and immigration invited her, along with a handful of men representing other national organizations, to discuss curbing refugee admissions (CWI, Burns, 12 Aug. 1957, 1).

Some coordinating committees developed good working relationships with local immigration authorities while others were sidelined by self-sufficient officers. The Ottawa coordinating committee provided a rare example of a Hungarian Canadian woman attaining a leadership role in the Anglo-Celtic-dominated society of the day by appointing "Mrs. Javorsky, President of the local Hungarian Association," as co-chair with a male counterpart (CWI, Address List 1-2; CWI, Dyson 1-2). The male-dominated Immigration Branch was not always well-disposed to working with the

more feminized Citizenship Branch (CWI, Burns, 22 Feb. 1957; Hawkins 96–97). In Montréal, Françoise Marchand either did not face such obstacles or found a way to overcome them. According to Yvan Corbeil, Lisette Laurent-Boyer, and Mireille Richard, Marchand served as “la cheville coordinatrice des efforts que chacun déploya pour venir en aide aux réfugiés [the linchpin in coordinating the efforts of everyone involved in aiding the refugees]” (52, 54–55).

The archives consulted do not show women’s associations making the kind and quantity of political intercessions that they had made during the migration of some 190,000 displaced persons to Canada between 1945 and 1952 (Trimble 83–100). Comparing the two movements is complicated, however, by the fact that the migration of displaced persons occurred over a longer period and involved a greater number and diversity of immigrants. Since the Hungarians benefited from considerable political support within government and civil society, women’s associations may have concluded that their backing was superfluous. This hypothesis is supported to some extent by a resolution, passed by the National Council of Women in June 1957, that made a link between the generous response to the Hungarian crisis and the desirability of applying that approach to refugees who had been languishing in European camps for years. They, like the Hungarians, were depicted as being fervently anti-communist and thus worthy of asylum despite their age or infirmity (McLean 5).

Women on the front lines in Canada and Europe

Some organizations, other than the local coordinating committees, were formed for the sole purpose of helping Hungarian refugees. Such was the case of Montréal’s *Œuvre des réfugiés hongrois* (ORH), created in December 1956 to consolidate Catholic aid among the French-speaking majority (Conseil 21). Gertrude Notebaert, a social worker and director of the Service d’accueil aux voyageurs, also took on the directorship of the ORH. She had an astute awareness of the challenges of providing immigrant services in a province where government and citizens alike were at best ambivalent and at worst hostile to postwar immigration, seen as rarely reinforcing the francophone, Catholic majority. She described her work as being subject to an “[a]lternance de popularité, d’impopularité, d’indifférence” [alternating popularity, unpopularity, indifference], but the Hungarian refugee movement, thought to be composed principally of Catholics, created “[u]n ouragan de miséricorde pour des persécutés du communisme [a hurricane of mercy for the persecuted by communism]” (1–6). Notebaert’s work facilitated the admission of Hungarian refugees to Quebec and their settlement in the French-speaking milieu.

On November 5, 1956, Peggy (Mrs. Douglas) Jennings assumed the direction of the newly created Canadian Hungarian Relief Committee, organized to help the Canadian Hungarian Federation with fundraising that had begun during the Hungarian uprising (DMCI, Grant 1). The creation of the relief committee dovetailed

with a shift in responsibility for fundraising from the federation to the Canadian Red Cross Society, which worked with associations such as Jennings's committee to raise and distribute funds. Dreisziger described how men and women of Hungarian origin were supplanted "by prominent Canadians, many of them women, who in turn could call upon influential Canadian individuals or institutions to help" ("Toward a Golden Age" 205). Jennings's involvement in Hungarian refugee initiatives reached a point where the Department of Citizenship and Immigration arranged for her to spend a month in Austria in December 1956. A Toronto member of Parliament (DMCI, Hellyer) outlined the expectation that upon her return she would use her "new knowledge and up-to-date information" to help with fundraising and to work with voluntary agencies to aid refugees. It is difficult to fathom how Jennings obtained such support for this undertaking. There is no indication that she had any special training, but she apparently satisfied other criteria. As a member of the conservative Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire, she and Mrs. B. B. Osler had created *Canadian Scene* in 1951 to provide the ethnic press with an alternative perspective to possible communist propaganda (*Imperial Order Daughters* 4; Niinistö n.d.). In other words, her cold warrior credentials were well established.

In December 1956 the Canadian Red Cross sent a team of seven people to Austria to run a refugee camp in Wiener Neustadt. The positions of director and doctor were reserved for men, but all other positions—nurse, social worker, nutritionist, administrator, and clothing specialist—were filled by women (DMCI, Stanbury 1956 and 1957). In May 1957, Olive Zeron, the camp's social worker and former director of the Windsor YWCA, shared her perceptions of Hungarian refugees in a YWCA publication. According to Zeron, young Hungarians were forced to work in factories far from their families and were thus deprived of a "home life" and "moral or mental education." Unused to so-called "normal life," the refugees would need time and the aid of Canadians to adjust. Thanks to their "Christian heritage" and democratic values, Canadians were well equipped to help with this process and teach attitudes such as gratitude, since the Hungarians had "never been taught to be thankful" (7–8). A June 1957 YWCA workshop report echoed the sentiment that Hungarian refugees lacked gratitude, but the author had sufficient insight to question what YWCA women expected from doing charitable work (*Frontiers of Faith* 2). The accounts of women refugees often speak of gratitude, thus suggesting a disconnect between the expectations of some Canadians and the modes of expression of some refugees (Romvary 93; Mihály 145). Zeron concluded her article by predicting that the intelligence and adaptability of the refugees, combined with Canada's proven capacity to receive the world's poor and persecuted and turn them into contributing Canadians, would finally win out. Instead of drawing upon her professional training to develop a deeper understanding of the Hungarian experience, Zeron reinforced stereotypes of the moral superiority of countries like Canada based on Christian and democratic tropes. Historian Franca Iacovetta has indicated that this interpretive

frame was not foreign to other Canadians working in the field of social welfare during the Cold War (487–88).

In February 1957, Jean Huggard, another Canadian social worker, was sent by the Department of Citizenship and Immigration to teach English in a camp in the Netherlands. Huggard offered less moralistic predictions of refugee adaptation than Zeron. She believed that although “some [would] certainly adapt readily and do well, others [would] just as certainly have many rough times (107).” In her assessment, housewives “seemed to be less worried about the future. Perhaps because they had never assumed any active part before, they felt a good measure of security as long as their own family unit was maintained” (274–75). This interpretation of the lived experience of Hungarian housewives seems colored more by the perspective of a woman used to working outside the home than informed by a professional lens. As demonstrated by Iacovetta, the social work lens of the time was as much influenced by cold war ideologies as by a “family ideology” of breadwinning fathers and dependent wives focused on home and children (484, 489–91).

Change of government, change in Canadian attitudes

In the summer of 1957, the Hungarian refugee movement fell victim to the newly elected Progressive Conservative government’s fears of an economic downturn. On July 11, 1957 the Cabinet accepted the recommendation of the acting minister of citizenship and immigration, E. D. Fulton, to discontinue the admission of refugees without “pre-arranged” employment. Friends, voluntary agencies, and church groups were removed from the list of authorized sponsors (DMCI, Press Release, 26 July 1957; DCI, Fortier, 10 June 1957, 1-4; Hawkins 116). Curtailing the movement had been in the works since at least mid-April, with the Liberal government still in power (Hidas 126–27). A memorandum had been sent to all immigration offices in Europe on May 1, 1957 explaining that “selection [was] to be restricted” to refugees who had been visaed prior to the date of the memorandum; to those who had wintered in specially arranged camps in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and France; and to refugees being selected by “special teams” in Austria, Italy, and Yugoslavia. Thereafter, visas would only be issued to refugees sponsored by close relatives and/or with prearranged employment (DMCI, Acting Chief). Ultimate decisions regarding further admissions or restrictions were to wait until after the upcoming general election on June 10, 1957 (DCI,³ Ignatieff; DMCI, Fortier 16 May 1957).

On August 7, 1957 Phyllis Burns attended a meeting between Minister Fulton and representatives of major national voluntary organizations. The minister justified curbing the admission of Hungarian refugees by indicating that public opinion

³ Department of Citizenship and Immigration fonds.

seemed to be turning against them, a trend likely to worsen if the winter brought “serious unemployment.” Burns regretted the negative impact this curtailment would have on Canada’s international reputation, as Austria would be left with the burden of caring for some 30,000 remaining refugees while a “have” country like Canada closed its doors. Burns and Joseph Kage, of the Jewish Immigrant Aid Society, also challenged the department’s plan to fund return trips to Hungary for “ringleaders” of refugee discontent. They suggested that these situations warranted further investigation to determine whether the refugees had “legitimate grievances or specific personal problems,” in which case offers of help would be more appropriate (CWI, Burns, 12 Aug. 1957, 3, 6–7).

Women’s views on the continued admission of Hungarian refugees were decidedly divergent as the movement approached the one-year mark. The Lethbridge, Alberta chapter of the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire was concerned about the burden cities would bear for unemployed refugees once the Department of Citizenship and Immigration’s one year of support came to an end (2 Oct. 1957; compare DMCI, Press Release 1956). In December 1957 Etta Burko of the Montréal Council of Social Agencies confirmed a decline in public sympathy for the Hungarians. That same month Margaret Peck, a social worker in Montréal, tried to enlist the support of the Committee on the Welfare of Immigrants to speak out against the government’s decision to “shut off” the immigration of refugees. The committee decided that getting involved in admission issues was beyond its remit, thus reflecting a refusal to link admission and settlement policies (CWI, 4 Dec. 1957, 5; CWI, 11 Dec. 1957, 4).

On May 10, 1958 Minister Fulton sent a proposal to the Cabinet to pay travel costs for a maximum of 3,500 refugees provided they had applied for visas before the end of April 1958 and would arrive before the end of the year. Ellen Fairclough inherited these dormant recommendations when she became minister of citizenship and immigration on May 12, 1958. She immediately came under pressure from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration to participate more wholeheartedly in clearing Hungarian refugee camps. In a June recommendation to the Cabinet, she maintained the limit of 3,500 but extended the deadline for visa applications to 31 August 1958 (DMCI, Fairclough 1–3). Being a woman did not make Fairclough more inclined to compassion or less concerned about Canada’s economic situation. In her memorandum to the Cabinet, she made it clear that once the deadline or maximum number had been reached, Hungarians would have to apply for admission as ordinary immigrants and pay their own passage to Canada (3). The limits of Fairclough’s compassion were patently obvious when she discussed Canada’s potential contribution to “the final settlement of the Hungarian refugee problem” with the other members of the Cabinet in July 1958. She frankly declared that “it might be considered that Canada had done enough, if not too much, in this matter” and it would be sufficient to offer to facilitate the admission of one-third the number that the United States had agreed to take, thus around 1,100 refugees (PCO, Cabinet Conclusions, 14 July 1958, 3–4).

Shortly after Fairclough's appointment, the YWCA's Public Affairs and World Service Education Committee passed a resolution commending the federal government for its "generous treatment of Hungarian refugees" while asking that 3,000 more be admitted (YWCA, Board of Directors 6–7). The board of directors declined to send the resolution to the government without first consulting member associations. In the version sent to local associations, 3,000 was replaced with "a number." Although the majority of respondents decided to support this lukewarm resolution, in some cases it provoked "lively" discussion. In St. Thomas (Ontario) those opposed to the resolution pointed to "rising unemployment figures and the failure on the part of many Hungarian immigrants to make any attempt to integrate" (YWCA, Replies from Associations 1-4). The middle-class women involved in women's associations were not only sensitive to the vagaries of the economy, but they also had very specific ideas of how the refugees should behave after their arrival in Canada. The Hungarian refugees experienced upheavals that ranged from the hope in October 1956 of establishing more democratic institutions, through brutal repression that cost the lives of relatives and friends, to exile a few weeks later (Dreisziger, "Refugee Experience" 73). Yet only a few months after their arrival, some Canadian women reproached them for their difficulty in settling into an entirely new situation. These women, by expressing their disappointment at this lack of enthusiasm for what they saw as the great gift of living in the "free world," contributed to a climate that closed the doors to all but a few more refugees.

Voices of Hungarian refugee women

The voices of women refugees were certainly not the most resounding in the Canadian public sphere. The Department of Immigration and Citizenship archives consulted revealed only one letter from a woman refugee and one from a Canadian woman of Hungarian origin. In the latter case, Mrs. R. Virag received a letter from relatives, dated 26 January 1957, describing their desperate situation in a French camp managed by private companies that made them work for miserable wages and housed them in rudimentary conditions. Mrs. Virag forwarded a translation of the letter to the Canadian Red Cross, which in turn sent it to the deputy minister of citizenship and immigration (DMCI, Wilson 1957). In December 1956 Minister Pickersgill had arranged to have France accommodate 3,000 refugees during the winter of 1956–1957. Camp conditions and the forced wait fostered mistrust and discontent among refugees quartered in France and in similar camps in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (Butler; M. T. qtd. in Kocsis 37).

In her letter, refugee Maria Egger sought to know why she could not find a position teaching English to Hungarians despite her Ph.D. in English from the University of London and her years of experience in Hungary (DMCI, Egger). Apprehensions about the ability to continue one's career in Canada were widespread among the

refugees and women shared this concern. Egger's letter raised the question of the discriminatory barriers refugees faced in finding work even when language and skill transfer were not issues. Márta Mihály, a forestry student from Sopron University, was appalled by the expectation that she and her classmates take menial jobs during the vacation period, a real waste of skills in her opinion (146–47). Eve Gabori (1978), a librarian in Hungary, and her husband adopted a perspective more in keeping with the Department of Citizenship and Immigration's expectations: believing that their exile had reduced them to nothing, they would take any job. Fortuitous circumstances and a spirit of initiative enabled Mrs. Gabori to resume her career as a librarian in a relatively short time.

One refugee, Mrs. Gabor Gido, became the subject of a long memorandum from Deputy Minister Fortier to Minister Fulton due to letters she had sent—two to the prime minister, four to Queen Elizabeth, and one to President Eisenhower—asking for help in returning to Europe. In January 1957, the Gidos had been placed with a family in Edmonton. Mrs. Gido soon began to complain about this arrangement, the lack of opportunities for her husband to practice his trade, and the perception that her family was receiving less assistance than other Hungarian refugees. She threatened to go to Ottawa to protest, gathering other refugees to her cause along the way. Fortier advised Fulton not to respond to Mrs. Gido, whom he described as “a chronic complainer” (DMCI, 5 Sept. 1957). She may very well have been the type of person Burns and Kage saw as needing support to overcome a difficult transition rather than dismissal as a troublemaker.

Refugees protested the policy of dispersing them across the country in areas they considered too provincial. One woman and her family, sent to Vancouver, saw the dispersal policy as a circumventable inconvenience because “they turned around and headed back to Toronto straight away” (J. G. qtd. in Kocsis 74). Susan (Zsuzsa) Romvary managed to convince immigration officials in Montréal to allow her family to remain there instead of continuing to Edmonton (91). In March 1957 Pickersgill declared that refugees were not “sent anywhere without their own consent” (CWI, Pickersgill 4-5). Yet, Judy Bing Stoffman's parents, accustomed to life in a “police state” (Stoffman), assumed that their only option was to remain in Vancouver even though they had friends and relatives and the prospect of work in Montréal. When Marta Hidy and her husband, both classical musicians, learned that their destination was Winnipeg, they asked an immigration officer if they could go to Montréal or Toronto instead. He explained that the government was sending refugees to different cities and provinces to tap into the resources necessary to help them. Canada being a free country, they could choose later to go wherever they wanted. They remained in Winnipeg for years, giving life to the music scene there before their careers took them to Toronto (Hidy).

The relationship between Hungarian refugees and Canadians played a role in admission by opening the door to other refugees. In her autobiography, Eva Kende provided a vivid description of the encounter between Hungarian refugees and charity women in Winnipeg in February 1957. Kende descended from the train as

one of a “ragtag group” of refugees welcomed by well-dressed women ready to set them on the path to “becoming Canadian.” Kende found the women sincere, “even if their understanding of [the refugees’] plight was somewhat deficient.” Positive relationships developed in the context of the government’s plan to house refugees in private homes could be used to persuade other families to accommodate refugees. They also made for good press. In May 1957, the women’s magazine *Chatelaine* published an article about the Mayers, a couple hosted by an affluent surgeon’s family (Locke, “Can the Hungarians Fit In?” qtd. in Korinek). Historian Valerie Korinek described the article as “romanticizing” the refugees and praising the generosity of Canadians and the “democratic consumer paradise” that was Canada (285). Mrs. M. Filwood, a reader responding to the article, was impressed that Katarin (Katey) Mayer “ironed clothes for the doctor’s wife and . . . did other helpful duties for her, just out of sheer enjoyment of helping” (Filwood). Neither the author of the article nor its readers looked beyond the surface to consider the challenges of feeling indebted to one’s hosts, obligated to work as a cleaner in a hospital, and compelled to change one’s name in order to “Canadianize.”

Although their voices were seldom heard in public debates about admitting the Hungarians, women refugees played a symbolic role in those debates. Stories of escape from the clutches of communism fascinated most Canadians, who not only consumed them for their compelling nature, but also because such stories confirmed their worldview (F. L. qtd. in Kocsis 86). Agota Gabor, who arrived with her mother on one of the first refugee flights, said her youth attracted the attention of the assembled journalists. Before she could greet her father and brother, who had been in Canada since 1948, the journalists impelled her to “touch the ground of freedom” (Gabor), thus spoiling the family reunion but providing images and storylines that fit Canadian constructions of the refugee movement. On January 25, 1957, a member of Parliament extolled Canadian generosity toward the Hungarian refugees, while foregrounding women and children: “We are dealing with babies, little children, mothers and others who . . . have done more than all others to unmask communism and indicate to the world the true nature of this vicious force.” (Canada, Parliament, 25 Jan. 1957, 675). The “and others” were the men who made up the majority of refugees and certainly the majority of those admitted to Canada. By April 30, 1958 22,764 male refugees of all ages had been admitted as compared with 13,150 female refugees (DCI, “Hungarian Refugees”). The speaker clearly saw women and children as poignant victims who inspired sympathy. Saving babies and mothers also painted Canada in a more heroic role than receiving relatively healthy young men would. Yet, part of the Department of Citizenship and Immigration’s early reluctance to respond to the crisis by admitting large numbers of refugees was due to mistaken information suggesting that most of the refugees were women, children, and old men. During a Cabinet meeting on 14 November 1956, Minister Pickersgill expressed the opinion that such refugees would be better assisted by sending relief to Europe and that Canada should only

admit refugees “who could find employment” or offers of sponsorship (PCO, Cabinet Conclusions, 14 Nov. 1956, 7–8).

The case of Ibolya Grossman, a widowed mother of an adolescent son, seems to suggest that the disinclination to admit women without men abated relatively quickly, since she did not report any difficulty in obtaining her visa in December 1956. The assistance that she and her son received from Jewish organizations and employers in Austria and in Canada may well have facilitated her entry into the country (Grossman 79-80, 83, 85, 97). It is also possible that the Department of Citizenship and Immigration became more open to the admission of unmarried women when it became apparent that they represented a very small portion of the refugee population. Eighty-two percent of adult women who arrived in Canada were married, as compared with fifty-two percent of adult men (Hidas 134). Admitting women as part of a couple presented less of a risk than admitting single women since the wife could always be supported by the “male breadwinner,” in keeping with the 1950s view of the division of labor between husband and wife (Prentice et al. 337). Eve Gabori and her husband were flabbergasted at the ease with which the decision to accept them was made. When Mrs. Gabori met Canadian officials in Austria, she found them so nice that their attitude seemed suspicious. She was also surprised by their lack of interest in her religion and her excuses for joining the communist party (Gabori). Both Minister Pickersgill and Deputy Minister Fortier had made it clear to their Royal Canadian Mounted Police colleagues, responsible for security screening, that the refugees should not be considered as security risks unless there was strong evidence to support such a charge (Whitaker 85; DCI, Fortier, 6 Nov. 1956, 26 Nov. 1956). Their desire to flee Hungary was generally seen as sufficient proof of their rejection of communism.

Women among the Hungarian refugees were, according to Susan M. Papp, “better educated . . . , younger and more adaptable to life in Canada” than pre-World War II immigrants (42). They joined the women’s committees of cultural centers and churches linked to Hungarian Canadian communities and breathed new life into associated activities. Despite their political choice in seeking refuge in Canada, becoming involved in political issues in their host country, including immigration policy, was not a priority for the majority of Hungarian women who arrived between 1956 and 1958 (Kocsis 103).

Conclusion

The Hungarian refugees’ sacrifices in rejecting Soviet-style communism won the admiration of many Canadians, including women and women’s groups, who expressed support for their admission to Canada in letters to government and through their various actions to help the Hungarians resettle. Long concerned with the “Canadianization” of immigrants (Prentice et al. 54–74), many of these women thought that the refugees’

anti-communist rebellion made them ideal candidates for rapid and successful integration and deserving beneficiaries of the assistance of well-meaning Canadians like themselves. Their good intentions began to subside in the face of an economic downturn and their judgment that the Hungarians were not sufficiently grateful for the generosity of Canadians and the opportunity of living in Canada. The election of a Progressive Conservative government in June 1957 and its uneasiness about the economic situation emboldened those calling for an abatement of the Hungarian refugee movement. As minister of citizenship and immigration, Ellen Fairclough viewed adjusting to a less favorable economic situation as more important than humanitarian concerns for refugees that had already benefited significantly from Canadian largesse. Some women's associations also saw the Hungarians as overshadowing their ongoing crusade to convince Canada to accept the "hard core" of displaced persons still languishing in European camps, a deserving anti-communist population that had suffered longer than the Hungarians (Vancouver Young Women's 2).

The Hungarian refugee movement also brought to the fore the growing influence of professional women working for social agencies that were increasingly turning their attention to immigrant welfare. The expertise of these women, mostly social workers, and the increasing importance of the organizations they worked for facilitated their access to immigration policymakers. The Canadian Welfare Council's Committee on the Welfare of Immigrants and its secretary, Phyllis Burns, were prime examples of the trend towards feminized professionalization of immigrant services. Although women welfare professionals promoted approaches to Hungarian refugee settlement that were more adapted to the refugees' needs than the government's budget, their interpretations of refugee backgrounds and aspirations were still colored by Canada's Cold War and family ideologies. The government's need to draw on civil society to access sufficient resources to resettle the large mass of refugees created an opportunity for both volunteer and professional women to try to influence the policy contours of Hungarian migration to Canada. Yet, neither of these groups of women escaped the gendered expectations of the types of contributions they could make or that they play subordinate roles to male immigration officers.

Despite their advocacy on behalf of the Hungarian refugees, mainstream women's associations and immigrant serving agencies remained dominated by the Anglo-Celtic majority. They welcomed immigrant and ethnicized women as lambda members or volunteers, but seldom promoted them to leadership roles (Iacovetta 488–89). Women organizers from the dominant society had few qualms about supplanting women of Hungarian origin in the fundraising campaign on behalf of refugees, since they saw themselves as possessing the skills necessary for a better-organized and more professional approach (Wipper 86–89).

Women were solidly outnumbered in the Hungarian refugee movement, but well over 8,000 adult women arrived and expressed, sometimes through action rather than words, their opinions of the arrangements they encountered in Canada. Refugee women were also present in political debates on the admission of Hungarian refugees

when their stories were used to influence public opinion. Language and cultural barriers and their subaltern positioning made it difficult for them to make demands related to their admission or that of other refugees, but their stories reveal their efforts to shape their own Canadian destinies.

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