

Columbia University Research Project Hungary

1956 Hungarian Refugee Interviews at OSA Archivum, Budapest

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Introduction

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the 1956 Hungarian revolution, OSA Archivum has copied, digitized and put online the complete series of the English transcripts of those Hungarian refugee interviews that were conducted in 1957 and 1958 within the framework of the Columbia Research Project Hungary (CURPH). On 4 November, 1956 Soviet forces launched their second attack against Budapest in order to replace the legitimate Hungarian government. OSA Archivum opened the online collection of its holdings relating to 1956 on 4 November, 2006, commemorating this tragic event of 20th century Hungarian history. Among other holdings and new acquisitions of OSA Archivum, the new digital archive contains the whole series of Hungarian refugee interview transcripts and other related records, a selection of background and organizational/corporate records of CURPH (originally labeled '*Subject files*') that were made available to us by the Bakhmeteff Archive at the Butler Library of the Columbia University, New York, and the National Széchényi Library, Budapest.

Some of the CURPH interviews had been already available in Hungary since the early 1990s. In 1991 the Hungarian historian and writer János Kenedi, a prominent dissident of pre-transition times, photocopied and brought home a broad selection of the CURPH interviews from Columbia University, 149 interviews out of the whole set of 626, and deposited the records at the National Széchényi Library.¹ The rest of the files, including the '*Subject files*', were "repatriated" in digital format by OSA

¹ In 1990 a team of Hungarian scholars had the opportunity to do the first systematic research on the CURPH files at the Library of Columbia University. A summary of their findings was published as: Csepeli György, Dessewfy Tibor, Dulovics Dezső & Tóka Gábor, "*Refugees and Theories*" [Menekültek és elméletek]. In.: 1956-os Intézet -- Évkönyv, 1998 (Annual of the Institute for the History of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution), Budapest, 1998, pp. 253-286. See also: Tóka Gábor, "*Ideological Constraints on the Political Attitudes of the Hungarian Refugees*." Paper presented at the 25th National AAASS Convention in Honolulu, 1993.

Archivum in 2006 with the help and generous support of the former US ambassador in Budapest and his wife, Donald and Vera Blinken.

After the suppression of the revolution almost two hundred thousand Hungarian citizens opted to escape and find a new home abroad. They were not only the primary eye-witnesses to the revolution itself but also to life under Communism. The Soviet bloc, during and after the Stalin era, was a hermetically closed orbit. The self-image projected by these regimes seemed both enigmatic and threatening to outside observers. Therefore, like other Eastern European refugees who managed to flee to the West throughout the 1950s taking with them their experiences and knowledge, the Hungarian refugees were a vital source of information on everyday reality under Communist rule. What made the Hungarians particularly important was not only their arrival in one great wave but also the fact that they had witnessed something inconceivable at the time: the people had brought down at one blow a regime that had been deemed unshakable. Western observers hoped that the eye-witness accounts of the Hungarians would reveal the concealed mechanism of the Stalinist state and also the mystery of its collapse.

CURPH was not the only program that targeted this issue. Nevertheless, it was the best organized and most elaborate project. More than 600 interviews were conducted by specially trained, native Hungarian field-workers in European refugee camps and in the United States. Most of the interviews lasted two or three days, and the final English transcripts averaged 50-70 pages each. The interviews were based on a detailed questionnaire, interview guidelines that had been carefully worked out by sociologists and public opinion experts. At that time these disciplines were much less developed than they are today, but some of the early classics in these fields gathered their first professional experience within the framework of this project. Prominent scholars Henry L. Roberts and Paul E. Zinner, the forerunners of Kremlinology, worked on setting up the project and evaluating the results alongside Siegfried Kracauer and Paul Lazarsfeld, philosophers and sociologists from the former 'Frankfurt school'. The researchers did not limit their inquiry to the events of the revolution. Hundreds

of questions aimed at uncovering the details of everyday life, the living standards, working conditions, social changes, cultural developments, changes in public mentality and morality, ideological indoctrination, religious matters and the survival of traditional values. All in all, the survey targeted the elusive totality of the *human condition* under totalitarian rule.

The Initiative

During late 1956 and early 1957 the Ford Foundation, one of the greatest supporters of scholarly research on non-Western European areas in the U. S., received numerous grant applications seeking support for Hungarian refugee interviewing projects. The preliminary report written by an unknown author tried to provide an overview of those projects that had similar aims and had already been launched or run by any academic institution, civil organization or governmental agency in the United States. The report not only enumerated the ongoing projects but also attempted to provide a professional evaluation of them. It identified five initiatives, among them the one that was undertaken by the Free Europe Committee (FEC), the American Committee for Liberation, and a government-sponsored one run by the Department of Defense with the Special Operations Research Bureau of American University (Rasmussen project). The author of the report also had a background conversation on the issue with Prof. Henry L. Roberts, Director of the Russian Institute and of the Program on East Central Europe at Columbia University who believed that there was a constant need for a broad interviewing project. "Prof. Roberts particularly stressed the importance of an approach based on a thorough acquaintance with the specific Hungarian situation, especially the *historical* background. He feels that there is a danger that an interview project, while soundly conceived [in general social science terms], might overlook many of the [specific] features of the Hungarian situation." However, as Professor Roberts added, "The Russian Institute and the Program on East Central Europe would find it difficult to undertake direction and supervision of a project as extensive as would be required, as they do not have the staff and administrative machinery set up for such an undertaking in the very near

future. Consequently, they do not desire to [take] the initiative, but have a continuing interest in cooperating in any soundly based project."

The summary of the report stated that the FEC project was "broad and comprehensive" but it was "rather strongly psychologic in orientation and limited to refugees in the U. S.", while the Rasmussen project "appears to be wholly inadequate except a limited investigation of recent opinions and experiences." Finally, the report concludes as follows: "While other private research organizations (other than academic) have more advantage, they have no immediate prospects, and all seem to have considerable limitations. They do not seem to have sufficient understanding of the problems involved in broad research, and it is questionable whether they have the administrative resources to carry out such a project. The major academic research centers on East Europe and the foundations are reluctant to proceed in this field unless their work appears indispensable. With a few exception, well-informed specialists feel that the present efforts are insufficient to utilize the opportunity presented by the Hungarian refugees, and feel that coordination, support, and encouragement by the Ford Foundation or other private source would be very valuable." /Document No. 1.: [Preliminary Report on Investigation of Activities and Projects for Interviewing Hungarian Refugees/](#)

(Let me here draw attention to the minutes of the joint seminar with the Society for the Investigation of Human Ecology, International Research Associates and other interested institutions on the Research on the Hungarian Revolution that was held in New York. Alexander Dallin, then already the executive director of the start-up CURPH project, was also invited to this seminar. The minutes provide an insight into the problems and areas of interest that the American scholars identified at that time relating to the scientific investigation of Hungarian refugees.

/Document No.2.: [Seminar on Research on the Hungarian Refugees. Society for the Investigation of Human Ecology. April 12, 1957./](#))

Most probably, this final conclusion urged the representatives of both the Foundation and the Columbia University to reconsider the feasibility of establishing more detailed and profound research on the

Hungarian refugees. On February 8, 1957, Shuyler Wallace, Director of the School of International Affairs at Columbia University, forwarded the preliminary description of an interviewing project elaborated by Henry Roberts to John Howard, Chief of the International Training and Research Division at the Ford Foundation. The research proposal emphasized the particular significance of the fact that "the recent and continuing flight abroad of over 150,000 Hungarians provide a potential source of information about Hungary, the Soviet orbit, and the international Communist movement equaling and perhaps exceeding in importance the other major sources which have been available to Western scholars in the last twelve years." The proposal provided a detailed conceptual device and structural description of the planned project. "The question of most obvious interest and the one which should provide the central theme of the project concerns the vicissitudes of Hungarian society and its individual members under the impact of sovietization and of the recent violent convulsion against it." The proposal appropriated the compilation of the different types of questionnaires, pre-test interviews in New York (finally, 38 were conducted), then a field operation in Europe during the summer in parallel with another interviewing project in United States refuge camps and cities. The European operation was regarded a vital element of the project for two major reasons: "(1) to interview specific, knowledgeable individuals not here available; (2) and to avoid the elements of selectivity and bias, operative in the sample admitted to the United States or, for that matter, to any other single country." It is clear from these considerations that the project designers hoped to find potential respondents who, as former members of the communist party or its security forces, might have been disinclined or found it difficult to enter the U. S. They were also absolutely aware of the potential risks of "tarnishing" and/or "adopted" memories of the future subjects of the interviews. The writers of the proposal did not intend to hide certain additional concerns that could already be foreseen at the beginning. These stemmed from the lack of previous professional experience, and the extremely tight time schedule and complexity of the project. Yet, they believed that the risk of missing the opportunity was much greater. "At present, therefore, our judgment is that the information which may be gained from the Hungarian

refugees is of such importance that we should not take the chance of failing to exploit it. If there is an element of risk in embarking upon a major undertaking like this, it is a risk we could seriously regret not having taken if the recollections of the Hungarian refugees were permitted to fade and be dissipated without being collected, analyzed and made available to those interested in Eastern Europe, and the operation of the totalitarian system."

The proposal requested the Ford Foundation to make a grant of \$ 211, 250 that the foundation eventually approved. Alexander Dallin, Visiting Assistant Professor, International Relations, Russian Institute at Columbia University was appointed program director and chief of the "European" branch. Prominent scholars on Eastern and Central Europe were invited to join the Board of Advisers, including Robert F. Byrnes, Oskar Halecki, Philip E. Mosley and Cyril E. Black, as well as Hungarian Area Specialists: Stephen Kertesz, Paul Kecskemeti and Andrew Jaszi. /**Document No. 3.** : [Letter to John Howard by Shuyler Wallace, February 8, 1957 \(The Original Grant Application of CURPH for the Ford Foundation\).](#)/

The Structure

At the beginning, the designers of the project wanted to create three types of questionnaires. Type "A", the longest, aimed at mapping the respondents' political, cultural and social background, attitudes, their role in and personal impressions on the revolution, views on the future perspectives of a supposed independent Hungary, etc. As the introduction to '*CURPH "A" Interview Guide*' says: "Type "A" is an oral depth interview of about two days' length to be given to several hundred refugee respondents. While factual information is sought in some of the questions (personal experience, arrests, budget, etc.), in this type of interview we are equally interested in the subjective elements and even in the respondent's bias and distortions."

The "A" type was divided into six main parts. It started with '*Section R*', questions about the respondent's personal experience, knowledge and opinion of the 1956 revolution. The rest of the areas

of interest were related to the entire post-1944 period. '*Section W*' scrutinized the subjects' professional career, work record, experiences, working conditions and standard of living. '*Section S*' focused on social change, education, family life and amity relations, and also religious matters. '*Section G*' set forth questions that were related to the respondents knowledge, views and experiences in connection with the government, party, police and state security forces, courts, army and mass organizations.

Communication- and propaganda-related issues were discussed in '*Section C*', while personal convictions, world view, ideology in political and related fields in '*Section I*'. Most of the transcripts of the interviews contain an additional '*Section X*' in which the interviewers were able to provide a short estimate of the respondent's personal character, reliability, intellectual capacity. In many cases, the personal comments, or rather *say-offs* of the interviewers also appear in the transcripts within the various sections. Perhaps the most interesting one in this regard is interview No. 407: the text betrays that sometimes during the conversation the respondent and the interviewer got into a veritable duel.

The preliminary instructions given to the interviewers encouraged them to pursue a lively discussion with the subjects but left them only limited space for improvisation. The main emphasis was that the respondents should feel liberated to express their views and opinion as properly as possible, and certainly avoid the impression that any kind of interrogation was taking place. "The interview questionnaire presented here is the skeleton of the conversation. Except as otherwise indicated, it is important -- for a variety of reasons -- to ask all questions, and in the sequence given. Each question is intended to introduce a new segment of experiences and attitudes and must be explored further by means of additional probes. (...) We attach great importance to informality of interview conditions, close rapport between interviewer and respondent and spontaneity of response. The respondent may have been interviewed, interrogated, or cross-examined before -- in Hungary as well as after his flight - - and may be tired or skeptical of interviews. (...) The questions are designed to give the respondent an opportunity to voice first what is uppermost in his mind, without having his thoughts or reactions channeled in any direction. The interviewer should try to keep the respondent in this spontaneous frame

of mind as long as possible."

First, a general introductory statement informed the respondents about the purpose of the interview and the process (see: Appendix). It stressed that the research was exclusively of a scientific character: it was politically neutral, and the project had no affiliations to the government or any of its intelligence branches. It also guaranteed anonymity for the respondents in order to dispel potential fears that retorsions might hit their relatives at home if their participation in the project and/or their remarks were made known. The CURPH records in the custody of OSA Archivum comprises the series of facesheets on which the respondents' basic personal data were recorded, their age, gender, education, profession, etc., as well as information on where and when the interview was conducted. The facesheets were handled separately from the interviews for security reasons but the connection between them and the interviews can now be re-established on the basis of their numeric code. In the case of the interview transcripts that OSA Archivum received from the National Szécsényi Library the respondents' names (or pseudonyms) were included in the facesheets but OSA wiped out the names following the guidelines of the Columbia University. The names of the respondents and all other personal data from the transcripts had originally been deleted by the archivists of Columbia University. In the case of the "Szécsényi"-records OSA staff carried out the sanitation process, therefore the interviews on the OSA Archivum web-site remain anonymised. For the on-line collection OSA staff created an electronic database from the facesheet data, using no personal data, that enables the researcher to accomplish a preliminary filtering within the records.

The transcripts of the interviews do not contain the questions: only the section and the questions' numeric codes are indicated. There are a few interviews from which even these marks are missing. Therefore, at least in the early stage of research the *'Interview guidelines'* are an essential auxiliary tool for a close reading of the records. /**Document No. 4.:** [Interview Guidelines for "A" type interviews/](#)

At the beginning, the respondents were given the opportunity to make an initial statement of

what they believed it was most important to inform the Western public about, concerning the revolution and/or the situation in Hungary in general. Then, the interviewer went more or less systematically through the prescribed sections and questions. The conversation lasted one or two days, sometimes even more, depending upon the relevance and richness of the respondent's replies. The average length of the transcripts is around 50-70 pages, but there are some interviews that exceed one hundred. Interview No. 152, conducted with a former politician of the Smallholder Party, is 541 (!) pages long.

From the project's background records it is not clear according to what method or mechanism the respondents were selected from the pool of refugees by the field workers. It seems that there was no systematic and elaborated selection procedure which, according to later assessments, has become one of the main limitations of the project from a scientific point of view. This was partly due to the extreme haste with which the project had to be designed and accomplished in order to preserve the "freshness" of the informants' memory. But it was also due to the lack of basic initial information on the sociological profile of the refugees in a given area. Most probably, the subjects were selected on a random basis and/or upon the basis how they "recommended" each other. One of the results of this was that the so-called social elite, public figures, former politicians, writers, artists who could be identified and reached more comfortably were somehow over-represented within the sample. However, a number of child interviews were also conducted.

Type "B" interview was a shorter and more specific questionnaire which targeted those respondents who proved to be particularly "interesting, informed important individual refugees." The original intention was to pursue another separate round for former members of the communist political elite or military, police or state security personnel. Later on, the interest was extended to the areas of state administration, economic planning and management, and then, simply, interesting people. For instance, the poet György Faludy who had never had any affiliation with the regime was the subject of a "B" type interview. /**Document No. 5.:** [Interview guidelines for "B" type interviews/](#)

The selection of respondents for the "B" type interview was much more obvious and adequate:

it was based either on the interviewers' recommendation from the first "A" round, or on the basis of "individual 'procurement', regardless of whether or not they have received or are to receive type "A" interview." Finally, the team tried to identify respondents on those "subjects of interest which individuals on the staff (...) hope to pursue, e.g., church-state relations; ethnic conflicts; state planning procedure; the role of Soviet personnel; the operation of a local Party unit." Among the CURPH records preserved at Columbia University the "A" and the "B" types of interviews were intermingled and kept together.

The designers of the project considered supplementing the "A" and "B" types with a third one, a written (Type "C") questionnaire. "This would be an effort to cast a wide net to obtain comparable information from a larger number of individuals than could be reached through oral interviews. It is suggested that this procedure be seriously weighed after pre-testing and examining the early findings." In fact, no blank or filled "C" type questionnaire remained. It seems that "C" type sub-project was never even started.

The project went on more-or-less smoothly according to the original time schedule laid down in the proposal in February. Around 200 interviews were conducted by a team of field workers and interviewers in Europe during the summer of 1957. The headquarters of the team was located in Feldafing on the Starnberger See, some twenty-five miles south of Munich, Western Germany. The interviewers visited the refugee camps nearby, but quite a lot of interviews were conducted in camps near Vienna, some in Italy, Switzerland, and also in Paris, France. Four top Hungarian writers were interviewed in England. The "European division" was lead by the executive director of the CURPH project, Alexander Dallin. The rest of the interviews were conducted, however, by the staff of the offices of the project in the US: in Camp Kilmer refugee camp, in New York and in other cities. The respondents received financial compensation for their time and efforts. /**Document No. 6.:** [Alexander Dallin's memorandum on the progress of CURPH, October 1, 1957/](#)

The recording, translation and transcription of the interviews were finished by Fall, 1957. As

the project was slowly running out of the funds provided by the Ford Foundation, the organizers submitted an additional application and requested further support for the analytical work and the publication of its findings. /**Document No. 7:** [Letter to Cleon Swayzee, Ford Foundation for additional grant](#)/ From this application it seems that a collection of essays was initially planned. This book, however, has never come out.

Evaluation and Re-assessment

After the interviews were transcribed and gathered, an evaluation process started. In the first stage the three "founding fathers" of the project, Henry L. Roberts, Paul E. Zinner and Alexander Dallin held a seminar at Columbia University from March 3 to May 12, 1958. /**Document No. 8.:** [Seminar on CURPH -- Government 362 A II.](#)/ In the meantime, leading experts on sociological research, quantitative and qualitative methods and other related fields were invited to investigate the interviews and provide either professional advice on how to utilize them in the most fruitful way or evaluate the scientific magnitude of the records. The reports and papers of Siegfried Kracauer, Jay Schulman, W. O. McCagg, Allen Barton and Rainer E. Koehne can be found among the background materials of the project. Parallel with this, the project management also called prominent Hungarian émigrés -- some of them previously interviewed during the project -- to share their own personal outlook on the political, cultural and social developments in Hungary prior to the revolution. The manuscripts of Ferenc A. Váli (legal scholar, author of *Rift and Revolt in Hungary*), Miklós Molnár (historian, settled in Switzerland, author of the *Victoire d' une défaite: Budapest, 1956*), Zoltán Sztáray, György Heltai and István Mészáros were also incorporated into the background files.

The first preliminary evaluation of the project was made by its director, Alexander Dallin in his memorandum (see **Document No. 6.**) after the European phase of the project was terminated. Dallin set out the difficulties caused by the extreme haste and shortage of staff. There was no time for proper feedback and adjustment of the questionnaires to field experience. "[N]early nobody was able to give

systematic substantive attention to the interviews in a fashion that might have improved their value in the course of the interviewing process." -- Dallin wrote. Sometimes the interviewers failed to go through the questionnaires with the required discipline and subtlety, and it also became obvious that the amount of information accumulated in these long interviews made it extremely difficult to organize the data in a meaningful way.

Henry L. Roberts submitted his final report to the Ford Foundation on the CURPH project in January, 1962. It pointed out that the major tasks and primary aims of the project had been accomplished. Hundreds of interviews were conducted, transcribed and deposited at the Library of Columbia University and other libraries. The report listed some publications that came out and utilized extensively the results of the project, including two books written by Ferenc A. Vali ("*Rift and revolt in Hungary*", Harvard, 1961) and Paul Kecskemeti ("*The Unexpected Revolution: Social Forces in the Hungarian Uprising*", Stanford, 1961), and also referred to Paul E. Zinner's book, which was in press at the time when the Roberts report was submitted. ("*Revolution in Hungary*", Books for Libraries Press, 1962). However, the report did not attempt to conceal the shortcomings and the relative failure of the project. In addition to the difficulties caused by the shortages of time and personnel and the problems of team-work and cooperation, it clearly states that "[w]e had far better luck (...) in gathering the material than digesting, interpreting, and presenting it. The reason may, in part, be the administrative problems referred to above. But beyond that I have the impression that we have not yet mastered the techniques for making adequate use of this type of data. I spent one whole summer going through every interview and at the end was quite depressed to find that, while it had been most absorbing reading, I was quite snowed under by both the volume and the repetitiousness of the information." In the end of the report he adds: "I should like to make one defense of the whole project... When the Project was first considered, immediately following the Soviet suppression of the revolt, it looked for a time as though the iron curtain were going to close again as in the darkest days of Stalin. Our initial proposal had an urgent sense that unless these refugees were interviewed for what they

knew, we might remain seriously ignorant about the shape of things in Eastern Europe. Fortunately a degree of relaxation returned, Eastern Europe is relatively accessible... I cannot regret that our fears in this were not born out." /**Document No. 9.:** [Letter to Clean O. Swayzee by Henry Roberts, January 8, 1962. The final report to the Ford Foundation/](#)

If we take a look on the CURPH files now, we may have the impression that the main problem lay elsewhere. The lack of elaborated tools for opinion research and sociological interviewing at the time the project underwent was only part of the shortcomings. As Hungarian scholars in the early 1990s also pointed out, the relative failure of the program was also due to the limitations of the early-Cold War Western knowledge on communism. Very often, the questions reflected rather contemporary Western fears of communist propaganda and indoctrination, instead of being capable of eliciting relevant data on the mentality and attitudes of the respondents. The main focus of the project was to discover the non-existing secret of a communist society and its collapse. The respondents found trivial many issues from which the observers expected revealing information on the nature of totalitarian regime (collectivization, family life, religious matters). The Western observers also failed to notice the obtrusive discrepancy between the respondents' rejection of communism and communist party members, and their relative sympathy towards egalitarian, collectivist social ideas. It seems that they had an obsolete image of an essentially rural and religious Hungarian society and disregarded the urbanization, industrialization and secularization that had been under way long before the communist takeover. They were eager to identify traces of the communist impact on the human mind, and, in turn, received flat and unanimous repudiations of it. It was as if the Western scholars had taken the self-portrait of the Stalinist regime more seriously than its one-time subjects did. Perhaps these were the reasons why, within the framework of the CURPH project, the two aspects of communism, one from inside and the other from outside, had not met.

These difficulties, however, should not necessarily discourage current historical and sociological re-interpretations of the files. First of all, despite all its internal deficiencies, the CURPH

collection is still the biggest set of records, gained by a single systematic research project, that gives an insight into the everyday reality and public mentality of a Soviet bloc country in the 1950s, where similar contemporary field-research was not feasible at all. Moreover, a closer reading of these records may raise new questions. How did the Western perception of communism influence the early stage of the Cold war? How did the outside image of the Stalinist states shape the structure of the project and its results? How did the respondents' image of the West, mediated by the broadcasts of Western radio stations and propaganda-machinery shape their own behavior and sayings? This unique set of records of the memory of the 1950s and the 1956 Hungarian revolution, an exceptional heritage of the Cold war, now available on the web-site of OSA Archivum as the '*Donald and Vera Blinken Collection*', certainly requires a fresh regard.

APPENDIX

Introductory Statement

As you maybe already know, this research project has been established for the purpose of learning about Hungary. What we are interested in is what has happened since the second World War. How people reacted to what has happened. What it was that they liked and what they disliked, and why they did certain things.

This research, which is exclusively of a scientific character, is being conducted by Columbia University, one of the leading American universities. Owing to its scientific character, it does not propose either to justify or to refute any given thesis. It is independent from any political group or organization. It is not a government enterprise, not an émigré activity. Nor does secret military information fall within the sphere of interest.

What we want is above all the truth. Most of us here tried to follow the events in Hungary, as a result we know certain facts or at least we believe we know them. Therefore I am convinced that you will have many interesting things to tell us. It goes without saying that you can talk of anything with us with the greatest frankness. In order to be able to judge things correctly, first we have to know the facts, regardless of whether they are pleasant or unpleasant.

As you know, we do not care whether or not we know the names of the people we talk with. We do this partly for your sake, that is to dispel your possible worries in this respect, and partly in order to have not even a shadow of suspicion fall on ourselves. Also you are entirely free to refuse to answer any question to which you do not wish to reply for any reason. Please feel free to tell me if you wish to take a break if you have any other observation to make.

I hope you won't mind if I take notes as we talk. This is necessary in order retain exactly what I hear and thus have the full benefit of your experience for our work. Before we get started, if you have any questions you want to ask, I shall try to answer them to the best of my ability.