

# Miklós Tóth : HUNGARIAN REFUGEES IN THE NETHERLANDS 1956\*

## *Facts and Contemplations*

### Personal Notes

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are here today in order to look back upon history, but at the same time to look ahead as well. We look back with our personal impressions and our remembrances of the *past* and we look ahead with our knowledge we gathered meanwhile questioning ourselves *today*, what we can learn out of our experience in those days for the future. I was involved in the events in this country during the days of the Hungarian Revolution, but at the same time with my thoughts in Hungary, where my brother was president of the National Committee of our native town during the Revolution. Meanwhile fifty years passed both in Hungary and in the Netherlands. Meanwhile we had our 'cultural revolutions', our changes in values, changes in our ways of living and — this is very important for us nowadays — changes in our problems with immigrants. The Hungarian refugees were also immigrants. In fact they offered us a 'laboratory proof' of how to handle problems of immigration.

\*

One single remark. We have to realize, that behind the former Iron Curtain several demonstrations and actions of protest took place — among others in East Germany, in Poland, in Czechoslovakia —, but only the Hungarians shot. Because they did shoot, we are here together.

\*

Anticipating on what I intend to say I would like to mention that in my opinion the keyword of both Dutch and Hungarian history is "FREEDOM". Freedom in an honest way for the nation as well as for the individual citizen. The endeavour for freedom united mentally these two small peoples — the Dutch and the Hungarian nations —, geographically far from each other, but brought together by common ideals, by common religion, in a general human way. Students of Hungarian origin pursued — and nowadays are also pursuing — their studies at Dutch universities. Michiel de Ruyter is, if possible, maybe a greater hero in Hungary than in the Netherlands because he liberated Hungarian ministers, sentenced to the galleys of the Vice-king of Naples for their faith. This is only one single example of contacts in the fields of human values between the two peoples in the past, peoples which are, in my opinion, more similar to each other than we might suppose. Maybe also due to the fact, that both peoples — also in consequence of living together of both Roman Catholics and Protestants — learned the necessity of compromises in their history.

\*

But now we have to look back upon the events in 1956. At that time I was living in Amsterdam. For Dutch people the events in Hungary were a kind of repetition of their own tragedy during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. There was a deep compassion and moral engagement in this country with the Hungarians, because they had the courage to oppose one of the greatest military powers on earth. This was the reason for the members of the former Dutch Resistance Movement during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War for taking initiative not for political or military actions but for human aid.

In those days it was clear, that we had to foresee a huge number of refugees to the West, also to the Netherlands. Gijs van Hall, the later burgomaster of Amsterdam, took the initiative to set up a national foundation for helping Hungarians. This was an action forthcoming out of the Resistance Movement, of which Van Hall, together with his brother, was a kind of Minister of Finance during the War. I was the only outsider attending the meeting of the group of former members of the Resistance Movement, where this decision was taken. The action of this movement resulted in a few days in 8 million guilders, at that time a huge amount; later even more, for the Foundation Cupers. (Cupers was a leading man of the trade unions in the Resistance Movement.) At the same time the Red Cross as well as the churches and other organizations were collecting money for the refugees to come. The role of the Red Cross and that of the Churches cannot be emphasized sufficiently. According to a global estimation about 16 million guilders were collected for the Hungarian refugees.

\*

The reception of the refugees was impressive. Her Majesty Queen Juliana welcomed them in a radio-speech and visited them in the Julianahal in Utrecht. There the Hungarian Resistance Standard was handed over to Her Majesty, which we can also see today here, regularly guarded in the 'Koninklijk Huisarchief' in The Hague. I don't know any standard of the Revolution among the holiest relics of a country anywhere on the earth, not even

---

\* Paper held in the *Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael*, The Hague on a seminar '*The Hungarian Uprising of '56 and its Aftermath*' on 11 October 2006.

in Hungary. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of November the whole country stands still in the same way as in the evening of the 4<sup>th</sup> of May, for the victims of the Revolution. It was lugubrious — afterwards — to understand, that many of the victims were yet living at that moment, — they have been executed only much later by way of a terrible revenge, which never may be forgotten. The Dutch Olympic team refused to go to the Olympic Games in Australia, because they were not ready to meet Russian athletes as if nothing had happened in Hungary. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December a great manifestation at the National Monument on the Dam in Amsterdam took place in presence of all members of the Royal House and of the Dutch Government as usual on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May.

\*

Returning to the Resistance Movement I would like to mention here the names of Sándor Baracs, and Imre Tarnóczy, both of them being of Hungarian origin and members of the Dutch Resistance Movement during the war, who played an important role in the activities for the refugees. Imre Tarnóczy was the head of the central reception centre in the Julianahal in Utrecht, where later the refugees arrived and from where they have been “distributed” to several ‘reception centres’ throughout the country. The reception of the refugees was organised along the lines of their religious background, Roman Catholics, Protestants and Jews. This was the most practical way. There were only organizations in the different religious fields capable to organize and to manage the very special — and not to forget: unforeseen! — social work among the refugees. The Hungarian community in the Netherlands was united in helping the organizations especially with translation work, because the refugees in general didn’t speak any other language than Hungarian. There were two special groups, which must be mentioned here: 1.) several hundreds of university students, helped by the Universitair Asielfonds, set up in 1948 in consequence of the coup d’état in Prague, which organization got in this way a new push for its work among student refugees. 2.) The group of young labourers. Eduard Flor, a young Hungarian painter living in Amsterdam, set up, however, together with Dutch organizations, the Hungarian Aid-Committee for Industrial Training for a bilingual professional training in order to give these young men the chance to collect the necessary knowledge and experience in order to find their place in the Dutch industrial and commercial life with the required certificates of qualification. Several hundreds of young men could in this way find their ways in this country.

\*

Immediately after the 4<sup>th</sup> of November 1956, the day of defeat of the Hungarian revolution, young Hungarian students and former students at Dutch universities — members of the ‘Mikes Kelemen Kör’, Association for Hungarian Art, Literature and Science in the Netherlands, founded in 1951 in Utrecht, — started the composition of a booklet in order to give the future refugees in Holland a basic introduction into the Dutch society. Herein the refugees could learn the structure of Dutch constitution and the political life. They got a picture of the system of Dutch trade unions, the tax system and the social structure. They also received a short but good Dutch grammar and a concise Dutch-Hungarian dictionary. Dutch language courses in several parts of the country were organized. This was among other things the result of centuries of Hungarian tradition to visit Dutch universities. The basic philosophy was to get refugees integrated into the Dutch society as quickly as possible, but at the same time to keep and develop the values of Hungarian culture. This cultural life was (and partly is) practically unknown in this part of Europe, but it is an interesting and original one with many varieties in its several fields. The language is a problem, but nowadays it does not mean so many difficulties as it did in the past. We are living in Europe: many peoples living together. The Huguenots served as a historic model to us at that time. I remember an article in 1957 by Professor Brugmans of the Europe-Institute in Brugge/Bruges, who mentioned the same historic parallel for the Hungarian refugees. Immigration is a challenge for everybody. It is a chance for both parties to get enriched by the culture, the capacities and the experience of the other. It is necessary to be ready to accept the challenge on both sides and to do our utmost to make a success of it.

\*

At this stage I should like to return to the religious, i.e. cultural and social background. We may not forget that Europe, especially Western Europe, is basically one world of values, created by Christianity, Western Christianity. The Iron Curtain was set up by the Soviet Union for the greatest part along the border of the Realm of Charlemagne. The countries, which afterwards, around the year of 1000 joined Western Christianity, the countries of Central Europe, also Hungary, were later the natural reservoir of labour for Western Europe. It is important to realize, that people in these countries as well as in the ‘old’ Western European countries, had the same religious — i.e. cultural — values and codes with the possibility of easy mutual social integration. What we know today as the ‘Polish bricklayer’ is in fact the historic and normal effect of the ‘communicating vessels’ between the labour markets in Western and in Central Europe. And, we may not forget, that the labourers out of the Central European countries returned to their home countries. The Iron Curtain divided Europe into two unnatural parts. In consequence of this fact Western Europe, and certainly the Netherlands, was compelled to import labourers out of countries with fundamentally different cultural and religious background with the problems generally known today. Maybe we do not realize, that these problems are, in an indirect way, the consequences of the Second World War.

\*

I mentioned already, that Hungarian refugees offered us the possibility of a kind of ‘laboratory proof’ to handle integration problems. In my opinion it is necessary, that somebody entering a new country has to adapt to his new situation, but without losing the essence of his cultural and moral ‘luggage’. A refugee is however not simply an immigrant. He left his country for moral reasons! He left his country with an obligation for the country, for the people, which he left. Our basic principle when introducing refugees in the Dutch society was the following: enter this community, but don’t forget where you come from. You have your duties for both the Netherlands and Hungary in an ideal sense. This is in the interest of both parties.

\*

Today we meet Hungarian refugees in all fields of Dutch life. At the universities, in all faculties, we meet many Hungarians. In economic and business life on all levels, in cultural life everywhere, even in politics! We see this not only in the Netherlands, but also in other countries. According to my experience Hungarians have, generally speaking, the necessary adaptability. I saw in this respect the same picture among Hungarians as among Dutch in several parts of the world, where I was active during my professional life.

\*

Organizations of immigrants have an important task to fulfil. It is not the task of the state to integrate immigrants; integration is the obligation of the immigrants themselves and their organizations. Hungarian organizations flourish in this country, especially in the cultural and social fields, but not in the political ones. Activities of the churches are important. It is at the same time interesting to note, that the Mikes Kelemen Kör, mentioned above, is one of the best known Hungarian cultural organizations in Western Europe, maybe in the world, with a world-wide reputation of high quality scientific and literary performances. The electronic quarterly Mikes International ([www.federatio.org/mikes\\_int.html](http://www.federatio.org/mikes_int.html)) and the books in several languages edited by Bibliotheca Mikes International ([www.federatio.org/mikes\\_bibl.html](http://www.federatio.org/mikes_bibl.html)) are widely known. In all fields we see a mutual cultural and social enrichment not only on the ‘Hungarian’ side, but also on the side of countries, where refugees, in this case: Hungarian refugees, arrived. As regards the Hungarians we can say, that there exist several centres of Hungarian cultural and social life on earth. One of them in the Netherlands.

\*

You could see, that in 1956 it were not the Dutch state authorities, which set up and organized and paid for the reception of the Hungarian refugees in 1956, but Dutch citizens in this country — of Dutch *and* of Hungarian origin — who did the job on their own initiative. The authorities on all levels followed and finalized these initiatives. Therefore we can say that the reception and integration of the Hungarian refugees of 1956 was really a common success together with the greatest part of the refugees themselves. Finally everything happened for them. It was an active and fruitful cooperation between the refugees — the immigrants — themselves, Dutch and Hungarian organizations on all levels in this country including the Dutch authorities as well.

\*

Integration is a challenge for everybody. Everybody is involved in it. The immigrant as well as every member of the hosting nation. It is a common task. This is the lesson of the relatively small experience, the reception and the integration of Hungarian refugees in 1956, wherein men and women of two nations, united by the same basic human endeavour for ‘FREEDOM’ cooperated, and created a kind of a European cooperation *avant la lettre* in a nutshell.

The Hague, 11<sup>th</sup> October 2006

[Website Hungarian Federation in the Netherlands: [www.federatio.org](http://www.federatio.org) (in 3 languages)]