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Article abstract

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The Refugee ritual: Sopron students in Canada

LAURA MADOKORO

Abstract

In the power politics of international migration, the relationship between migrants and the states that receive them are inherently uneven. This is particularly true of the international refugee regime and the manner in which refugees have been identified and resettled in the postwar period. This paper traces the journey of 200 student refugees from Sopron University in Hungary to the University of British Columbia in 1956, following the failure of the Hungarian Revolution. It argues that the manner in which the Sopron students were selected and then settled in Canada assumed ritualistic characteristics with which the federal government attempted to shape their identity and normalize their entry into Canadian society. Tracing the Sopron students' refugee experience beginning with their flight from Hungary to their graduation from the University of British Columbia, this paper identifies four components to the refugee ritual: selection, movement, settlement and commemoration and argues that because the Sopron forestry students migrated as a group, they experienced the ritual experience to a far greater degree than other student refugees in Canada.

Résumé

Dans le jeu de puissance des migrations internationales, la relation entre migrants et pays d'accueil est par définition inégale. Cela s'applique en particulier au régime international des réfugiés et à la façon dont les réfugiés ont été identifiés et réinstallés dans la période d'après-guerre. Le présent article relate le parcours de 200 étudiants réfugiés de l'Université de Sopron en Hongrie jusqu'à l'Université de la Colombie-Britannique (UBC), en 1956, suite à l'échec de la révolution hongroise. La façon dont les étudiants de Sopron ont été choisis et ont pu s'établir au Canada peut être analysée comme un processus aux caractéristiques rituelles, au moyens desquelles le gouvernement fédéral a cherché à façonner l'identité des ces nouveaux venus, et à

The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of Henry Yu and Eagle Glassheim at the University of British Columbia who read early drafts of this article. The extremely helpful comments from two anonymous reviewers are also gratefully recognized.

normaliser leur entrée dans la société canadienne. Cette étude retrace l'expérience des étudiants de Sopron comme réfugiés, depuis leur fuite de Hongrie jusqu'à l'obtention de leur diplôme de l'UBC, selon quatre composantes rituelles attachées à l'étude des réfugiés (sélection, mouvement, installation et commémoration). Il avance qu'étant donné que les étudiants en sciences forestières de Sopron ont émigré en groupe, ils ont vécu cette expérience rituelle bien plus intensément que les autres étudiant réfugiés au Canada.

Ritual relates the individual to the collective by joining the emotional to the ideological.¹

The politics of migration are inherently uneven. Some players, such as national governments, hold sway, dominating the decision-making apparatus and defining the options available to those who would move or settle in new places. Others, such as the migrants themselves, are more vulnerable. They gather intelligence as best they can and decide if, when, and where to move. Nowhere is this imbalanced relationship more pronounced than in the area of refugee movements. States define who can fall into the legal category of "refugee," control the exit and entry of bodies into their sovereign territories and manipulate the discourse to simultaneously objectify and erase the defining characteristics of a refugee.² Relationships between states and refugees are therefore complex and there are a variety of approaches one can take in trying to understand them. One method is to interrogate the power structures that shape the relationship between the state and the refugee and the dynamics that sustain it.³ This paper traces the journey of 200 student refugees from Sopron University in Hungary to the University of British Columbia (UBC) in 1956, and argues that the manner in which the Soproners were selected and settled in Canada assumed ritualistic characteristics with which the federal government attempted to shape their identity and normalize their entry into Canadian society.

There exists a vast literature on the use of rituals in secular society.⁴ The very process of migration can be thought of as a ritual, one which entails a set of symbolic actions and public acts by which the state affirms its authority over

1 William H. Beezley, Cheryl Martin, and William French, eds. *Rituals of rule, rituals of resistance: public celebrations and popular culture in Mexico* (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1994), xv.

2 I am deeply indebted to Nick Simon and Jan Friedrichs at UBC for sharing their knowledge and passion for Michel Foucault's work with me. John Torpey, "Coming and Going: On the State Monopolization of the Legitimate 'Means of Movement'," *Sociological Theory* 16, no. 3 (November 1998): 239–59.

3 Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France 1977–78*, ed. Michael Sellenart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

4 See Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff, eds., *Secular ritual* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1977), Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press 1993), and David Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics and Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).

individuals.⁵ There are four components to the refugee ritual that took place in 1956 when Canada offered sanctuary to victims of the Hungarian Revolution: selection, movement, settlement, and commemoration.⁶ As this paper will demonstrate, the purpose of this particular migration ritual was to cast the students as heroes of the Cold War and ideal candidates for resettlement in Canadian society. They were selected, educated and objectified to these ends. Rituals, however, are rigid instruments. They are ordered in order to create order.⁷ As such, they can easily become ahistorical or irrelevant. In 1956, the Sopron students participated in an elaborate ritual that was replete with imagery and ideology and that tied them to a particular moment in the history of the Cold War. The identity that the state crafted for the Sopron students was a group identity, one that erased their individual agency and objectified them in the eyes of the state and the local communities in British Columbia. The students themselves had a variety of means of seeing themselves and the significance of their journey to Canada, but because their entire group was put through a ritualizing and, theoretically, normalizing process, what the Hungarian students experienced was a more extreme form of the ritual that has attended most other student refugees coming to Canada in the postwar period. This paper attempts to understand that ritual through the eyes of the state, to tell one side of the story about how the tremendous imbalance that exists between refugees and the nation states that resettle them is constructed by the party with the most power.

Sopron University in Hungary

Hungary's Sopron University is steeped in tradition. Founded in 1809, the university's trajectory has mirrored the country's tumultuous history. Its very ability to survive historic upheavals, such as the 1848 Revolution and the partitioning of the country as a result of the Treaty of Trianon, instilled a sense of pride and accomplishment amongst generations of staff and students. Narratives about Sopron University romanticize life in Hungary and emphasize the rich character of the student body.⁸ Characterized by "conservatism and tra-

5 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 48.

6 This is a take-off on Arnold Van Gennep's rites of passage: separation, margin, and aggregation. Arnold Van Gennep, *The rites of passage*, eds. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960).

7 Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969).

8 For example, see Laszlo Adamovich and Oskar Sziklai, *Foresters in Exile: The Sopron Forestry School in Canada* (Vancouver: Broadway Printers Ltd, 1970), Sopron Alumni UBC, *Sopron chronicle: Hungarian foresters in the western world, 1919–1986* (Toronto: Rakoczi Foundation, 1986), K.J. Roller, *The Development of Forestry Education in Hungary from 1809 to 1956: Papers Commemorating 150 Years of University Education in Hungary* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1959).

ditionalism,”⁹ the students at Sopron University have historically exhibited a strong patriotic bent. In their Student Federation Club, “love for the homeland and for freedom was emphasized through songs and discussion.”¹⁰ This passion resulted in a deep involvement in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 when hundreds of thousands of students took to the streets to protest against the oppressive Communist authorities. One faculty member recalls:

Young people were first to receive the message. University students in Budapest and central Hungary reacted quickly to events. Sopron was in the least central position, but closest to the greatest memento the communists had built — the barbed wire fence and mine fields which crossed the University Forest near the Austrian border about three miles from the campus.¹¹

The protests were concentrated in Budapest, but in Sopron, too, a Revolutionary Student Council, petitioned for change.¹² When the Revolution was crushed by the Soviets on 4 November 1956, a large number of Sopron’s students and faculty fled to Austria along with thousands of their compatriots “to avoid the cruelties expected from the Russians.” As armoured tanks rolled down the streets of Budapest, the decision seemed to be escape or face “useless bloodshed.”¹³

Sopron’s faculties of Forestry, Engineering, and Mining (the latter two became known as the Technical Group) remained in Austria for several months as their members deliberated about what to do next. Many countries, such as Italy and the United Kingdom, extended offers of aid but none met the group’s requests for financial support and their expressed desire to remain together as a cohesive unit. Dean K.J. Roller of the Forestry Faculty at Sopron University recalls that on 26 November 1956, a meeting was held during which it was finally decided that each professional group should go its own way and seek out a country willing to accept their faculty. He describes the meeting as “one of the most tense and stormy meetings of our refugee period.”¹⁴ When UBC communicated its willingness to accommodate the Faculty of Forestry in its entirety, including both students and staff, and the Canadian government made it known that it would subsidize the resettlement of the Soproners, the Forestry Faculty seemed to have secured everything it wanted. Still, the group of 200 students and faculty was faced with a difficult decision. Should it remain in Europe or relocate to unknown shores? Some agonized over abandoning their

9 Adamovich and Sziklai, 7.

10 Ibid, 9.

11 Ibid, 12.

12 Sopron Alumni UBC, 46.

13 Adamovich and Sziklai, 12.

14 Sopron Alumni UBC, 55.

homeland, but the majority ruled for Canada hoping for great educational and employment opportunities.¹⁵

Canada offers aid

The initial manoeuvring that led to the movement of the Sopron Forestry Faculty to UBC was initiated by Jack Pickersgill, the Canadian Minister for Citizenship and Immigration, who visited Vienna to investigate the refugee situation and became “excited” at the prospect of so much young talent. He immediately sent word to his colleagues in Canada that universities should be encouraged to offer admission to the Hungarian students. Laval Fortier in the Department of External Affairs communicated Pickersgill’s enthusiasm to Victor Sifton, Chancellor at the University of Manitoba, “these young men are the kind of people we need in Canada to advance our mineral frontiers just as the earlier immigrants your father brought to Canada advanced our agricultural frontiers.”¹⁶ Along with the University of Toronto and UBC, the University of Manitoba was a front runner in the race to obtain the Sopron groups. In Vancouver, MP James Sinclair and UBC Chancellor Norman Mackenzie were instrumental in putting together the successful bid. It was the university’s guarantee that the Forestry Faculty could stay together and study in Hungarian, and the offer of financial assistance from the Powell River Logging Company, that eventually won UBC the Sopron Forestry Faculty. The Technical Group proceeded to the University of Toronto.¹⁷ Ironically, it was the Soproners determination to stay together that enabled the Canadian state to create a group identity for them.

The Canadian government pursued the Sopron faculties for two reasons. The government saw in the students the opportunity to train (and then gain) highly skilled workers. Officials also discerned a chance to exploit the student body for propaganda purposes. Canadian rhetoric referred to all the student refugees as “freedom fighters” and celebrated their defiance of the Soviets.¹⁸ Canada was a loyal member of the western alliance and its foreign policy was

15 Charles Tarnocai in *Breaking ground : the 1956 Hungarian refugee movement to Canada*. (North York, Ont.: York Lanes Press, 1993), 90. See also UBC Sopron Alumni, 59.

16 Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), Department of Citizenship and Immigration Fonds (hereafter DCI), RG 26, vol. 146, file 3-41-22, “Admission to Canada of Hungarian Refugee students,” Fortier to Sifton, 7 December 1956. Victor Sifton was the son of Clifford Sifton, Minister of the Interior in the government of Sir Wilfrid Laurier, who was largely credited with facilitating the massive settlement of Canada’s prairies at the beginning of the twentieth century.

17 Peter Hidas discusses the movement of non-Sopron refugees in his article, “The Hungarian Refugee Student Movement of 1956–57 and Canada,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 30, no. 1 (1998): 19-50. Academic Search Complete, <www.webescohost.com> (accessed 27 November 2008).

18 The United States wanted Canada to publicize the relief efforts for the students in particular believing them to be a good illustration the more humanitarian aspects of the North Atlantic

geared to safeguarding democracy in Europe.¹⁹ Senior administrators at UBC shared the government's views on the importance of the students in terms of the confrontation between east and west. Dean George Allen of the Forestry Faculty told Pickersgill that the project of moving the students to UBC "is a vital part of the 'cold war' that highlights for the whole world to see the extreme difference between communism and a democracy such as ours in which the individual is respected because he is a human being."²⁰ The ritual had begun. The staff and students of Sopron University represented all that was wrong with the Soviet Union and good about western democracies and their relocation to Canada was facilitated accordingly.

Settling in at UBC

In moving to Canada, the Sopron students had to adapt to a new environment and a new country, to which most students had given little, if any, thought prior to their decision to accept the Canadian government's offer. Their movement from Austria to Canada was tightly controlled. Detailed passenger lists identified by name the person who was to embark on the trains and boats that would take them to Canada. An early incident caused considerable distress amongst the refugees. When the group first prepared to board the train from Vienna, they discovered that Canadian officials had omitted 20 students from their official list and were refusing embarkation privileges.²¹ The Sopron faculty protested, insisting that the group had to remain whole, and the Canadian authorities eventually relented. Hungarian officials later told the *Vancouver Sun*, "We must stick together. The University of Sopron must live on all through the blood and horror of the Hungarian Revolution."²²

The faculty and staff of Sopron University arrived in Canada in January 1957. They were greeted by bitter cold and warm hospitality.²³ They stayed in the Maritimes for a few weeks, alternately billeted with families or housed in

Treaty Organization. LAC, DC, RG 26, vol. 146, file 3-41-22, "Admission to Canada of Hungarian Refugee students," NATO Delegation to Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, 11 January 1957.

19 Robert Bothwell, *Alliance and Illusion: Canada and the World, 1945-84* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007).

20 LAC, DCI, RG 26, vol. 111, file 3-24-12-2, Part I, "Hungarian Refugees — Sopron, letter of congratulations from Dean Allen, UBC to Pickersgill, 31 December 1956.

21 Ibid., Memo to File, 31 January 57.

22 *Vancouver Sun* (8 December 1956).

23 It is interesting to observe that the Canadian literature on the students' movement celebrates the warmth of Canadian hospitality, the hosting of students in the homes of faculty and administrators at UBC, while Hungarian memoirs reflect a certain degree of bewilderment. One author describes the welcome as "cool." He explains, "we did not, at this time, appreciate the existence of typical Canadian reservedness" and this "created an illogical belief that we were considered as nuisances, or at best as competitors." Adamovich and Sziklai, 22.

university and military accommodation. The literature about this early period is remarkably positive and sweetly nostalgic. Memoirs commemorate early weddings and the novelty of visiting St. John's shops for the first time.²⁴ On 19 January 1957, the members of Sopron's Forestry Faculty boarded the "Freedom Train" and began to make their way towards the Pacific Coast. The train journey assumes ritualistic overtones when one considers how other Hungarian refugees were received in Canada. The students' movements were far more structured and regimented.²⁵ They alone were transported as a group from one end of the country to the other. Moreover, Pickersgill insisted on glorifying the students' movement. He instructed his officials to avoid publicity about most Hungarian refugees who were *en route* to their new homes so they "could fit into the landscape as unobtrusively as possible," but, "of course," he said, "we do want to make a feature of the movement across Canada of the forestry students."²⁶ The Canadian media played to the government's desires and glorified the train's journey and all that it represented.²⁷ The faculty and students of Sopron University were repeating a mythical journey: moving west across the Canadian prairies in search of the Promised Land.

In remembering the celebrating crowds at train stations across the country, Dean K.J. Roller described a sense of, "mixed feelings and apathy," of "not quite comprehending what was happening."²⁸ A similar sense of bewilderment attended the group's arrival in British Columbia.²⁹ Still, the students were not the first Hungarian refugees to arrive in the province. At the end of November, the first "Freedom Express" plane left Vancouver's International Airport to collect refugees from Austria. Upon the flight's return, the headline of the *Vancouver Sun* read, "MOB GREETES REFUGEES — Cheers, Handshakes as Hungarians Reach City." The paper's reporter crowed:

The voice of freedom rang out loud and strong in Vancouver's immigration building Tuesday night Sometimes it spoke in Hungarian, sometimes in English. Sometimes it rang pure and free with laughter and the many hopes that are born with a new life. Sometimes it was heavy with grief, with the unforgettable sadness of the death of a gallant nation. But from out of the noise and confusion, the intermingled tears and laughter that surged through the cold halls of the bldg as the first planeload of the Hungarian patriots to arrive in Vancouver poured out their stories to reporters, one word was repeated often. Freedom.³⁰

24 Sopron Alumni UBC, 68.

25 Recalling Foucault's elaboration of the manner in which disciplinary institutions exert their power through acts of distribution.

26 LAC, DCI, RG 26, vol. 93-5-12, file 3, Pickersgill to Deputy Minister, 11 November 1956.

27 "Hungarians get student welcome," *Globe and Mail* (21 January 1957), 17.

28 Sopron Alumni UBC, 76.

29 Tarnocai, 91.

30 *Vancouver Sun* (5 December 1956).

The glorification of the refugee movement seemed to know no bounds.

Upon their arrival in British Columbia, the students briefly joined other Hungarian refugees in a refugee camp in Abbotsford.³¹ The federal government then relocated them to another site of control, provided by the Powell River Logging Company, 150 kilometres north of Vancouver. Government officials described it as a “very well constructed construction camp, about half a mile from the centre of the town,” and the cleanliness of the buildings was noted at length.³² The purpose of the Powell River camp was to give the students an opportunity to learn English and be educated about life in Canada before beginning studies on the UBC campus in the autumn of 1957. One participant remembers, “classes were held all during the day for all members of the group, with lectures by university professors, government and industry people on customs, culture, economics and the history of the free world, with particular emphasis on Canada, their new home.”³³

The Soproners had traveled many kilometres together and they remained a self-contained unit even once they had arrived in Powell River, opting to cook for themselves and pursuing activities separate from those of the local residents. Evidence from the weekly *Powell River News* suggests that the community was somewhat reluctant to host the students. Under the headline “Sopron Students on Monday,” the local Hungarian Committee declared,

the community fully appreciates that there is a considerable degree of hesitancy and reserve among our people. The basic fact is that these people will be in our midst in a week; and it is in both our interests to help them become assimilated into our social, recreative (sic) and cultural life as quickly as possible As Canadians we have a direct moral responsibility to assist these people.”³⁴

Contacts with the community were quite limited and often took the form of special events such as entertainment evenings presented by the Hungarian students or sporting events that matched the Hungarian students against the local Brooks High Huskies. One contemporary newspaper account described the students’ activities as follows:

31 In the spring of 1957, there were over 600 people in the Abbotsford camp and, while the crowded conditions caused some concern, newspaper reporters assured their readers that the camp was benign, designed purposefully to produce good Canadian citizens. *Vancouver Sun* (1 May 1957). During their stay in Abbotsford, the students had their first visit to the UBC campus and they were hosted in the homes of UBC faculty and staff.

32 LAC, DCI, RG 26, file 3-24-12-2, Part I, “Hungarian Refugees – Sopron,” report by Pacific District Superintendent, Vancouver to Smith (Director) in Ottawa, 5 March 1957.

33 UBC Archives (hereafter UBCA), Information Services Fonds (ISF), box 33, file “Sopron,” “The Resettlement of a Hungarian University in Canada: Part I by George S. Allen.”

34 *The Powell River News* (14 February 1957), 1.

They put on a variety show which showed off their skill at fencing, their feeling for humor and the haunting quality of their national music and dancing. Students also sang songs they had not dared to sing in their Communist-controlled homeland for a long time They are settling down to Canadian ways and are adding much that is good from their own background.³⁵

Such newspaper accounts reinforced ideas of difference and otherness, but the government did not seem concerned about it.³⁶ In fact, Pickersgill refused an application by a Dr. Hawthorn to study the integration of the of group by explaining, "I cannot see the value of such a study being made on a group such as the Sopron University Forestry Faculty who, in the true sense of the word, are not being integrated into Canadian society at present but are continuing their studies as an isolated group at Powell River."³⁷ It would appear from this correspondence that the government was interested in having the group integrate into Canadian society, but at a later date.

From the remote conditions in Powell River the group was transferred to housing at the Sea Island Airport before making their way, finally, to the campus of UBC in the fall of 1957. Established in 1908, UBC's campus had changed radically in the postwar period. The student population tripled from 1944 to 1957 as returning soldiers took advantage of the government's offer of free education. Space was at a premium and classes and residences were located in former military barracks. The crunch persisted into the late 1950s and early 1960s as the baby boomers moved through the education system.³⁸ Significantly, foreign students made up an important percentage of this ever-expanding student body.³⁹ Yet the Sopron students experienced a sense of alienation and separation throughout the three years their university operated at UBC. Dean K.J. Roller remembers the campus as "isolated, a city unto itself."⁴⁰ Because of purported scheduling conflicts, the Hungarian students had their classes at night. The Hungarians also

35 *The Province* (23 May 1957).

36 Ibid.

37 LAC, DCI, RG 26, vol. 111, file 3-24-12-1, Part III, Memo to JWP from C.E.S. Smith, 8 February 1957.

38 Dean Allen says UBC "was enthusiastic about receiving the (Sopron) group, but its facilities were already strained by the booming growth of the province," which was the reason why the group was housed first in Powell River. UBCA, ISF, box 33, file "Sopron," "The Resettlement of a Hungarian University in Canada: Part I by George S. Allen."

39 Harry Logan, *Tuum est; a history of UBC* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1958), 241. The number of foreign students coming to UBC started to increase in the 1940s. By 1957–1958 more than 1,200 undergraduates out of a total enrolment of 9,000 received pre-university education in countries outside Canada. The historian Jean Barman mentions that prior to the 1930s, there were only a handful of ethnic students on campus and the overwhelming majority of these were Chinese. Jean Barman, *The West Beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, c2007), 246.

40 Sopron Alumni UBC, 79.

followed their own curriculum, which meant they were functionally separate from the other students and were therefore prevented from participating in the “normal” life of the university.⁴¹ Antal “Tony” Kozak believes this separation was necessary, “it took most of us two or three years to get to [a] point where [we] could pick up any book, including textbooks and read them with full comprehension.”⁴² Apparently, some of the students felt that “they were being deliberately exposed to such hardships to make [them] give up.”⁴³ The solution was to cultivate a unique student life through the Student Fraternity Club, but this led to charges of isolationism. While there was certainly a degree of truth to these accusations, they were hardly the sole responsibility of the Sopron students and faculty.⁴⁴ The final distinction came at graduation when students received a Bachelor of Science in Forestry from the University of Sopron instead of an engineering diploma from UBC. The type of degree offered was the subject to protracted negotiations between UBC and the University of Sopron administration. Due to the differences in requirements, UBC refused to grant an engineering diploma to the Sopron students.

The manner in which the group had been transported to Canada by the state reinforced its existence as an autonomous unit even after the students and staff arrived at UBC.⁴⁵ The Soproners’ physical separation meant they were especially vulnerable to objectification and exploitation. This condition enabled the state to dominate both the ritual process to which the students were subjected and the way in which they were presented to the Canadian public.

Life in Canada

Government officials and university authorities invested considerable energy in ensuring the positive reception of Sopron’s students and staff in British

41 The difficulty in integrating international students into Canadian academic life has been documented in recent studies of the growing foreign student presence in Canada in the 1970s and 1980s. See James D. Cameron, “International Student Integration into the Canadian University: A Post-World War Two Historical Case Study,” *History of Intellectual Culture*, 6, no. 1 (2006) <<http://www.ucalgary.ca/hic>> (viewed 28 April 2008); Karen McBride, *A Warm Welcome? Recruitment and Admission of International Students to Canadian Universities: Policies, Procedures and Capacity* (Ottawa: Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, November 1998).

42 UBCA, ISF, box 33, file “Sopron,” transcript of interview with Antal Kozak. Mr. Kozak later became the Associate Dean of Forestry at UBC.

43 Adamovich and Sziklai, 22.

44 Sopron Alumni UBC, 101.

45 Writing in 1912, scholar E.P. Lyon reminded his readers of the importance of treating students as individuals in the migration process, “our personal duty to the individual student is our fundamental duty. If we can do right by the individual student, we shall do right to the other colleges and the state.” See E.P. Lyon, “The Migration of Students,” *Science*, New Series 36, no. 930 (25 October 1912): 533–43, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1637160>> (viewed 22 April 2008).

Columbia due, in large part, to the anti-Sopron sentiment that was detected among unions in the province and the fear that such feelings might also exist amongst UBC's student body. Federal authorities and university officials needed to convince the public that the Sopron students, and the Hungarian refugees generally, were worthy of the extraordinary measures they had undertaken to arrange for their movement to Canada and reassure the public that they did not pose any threat to the Canadian way of life.⁴⁶ To do this, the refugees had to be simultaneously portrayed as qualified and non-threatening individuals. Fortunately for the authorities, the students had persecution and their anti-communist rhetoric on their side. They were also effusive in their thanks. Upon leaving Powell River for UBC, Miklos Gratzter (President of the Sopron Student Federation Club) told the local newspaper, "Powell River has a big heart. If you ever need proof of that, if you ever want us to testify to that, then ask us. We are YOUR slaves."⁴⁷

Reports of resistance to the Sopron group in British Columbia union circles first came to the government's attention during negotiations to move the Sopron group to UBC. The District Superintendent for Immigration informed Ottawa that when it was first announced the refugees would be accommodated in Powell River, "there was very definite and open opposition to the plan The unions feared this might be an attempt by the Powell River Company to bring in cheap labour, and at one time the feeling, especially in Union circles, ran quite high." There were reports of mass meetings.⁴⁸ Government officials worked to assure residents of Canada's westernmost province that they had nothing to fear.⁴⁹ Locally, the *Powell River News* assured its readers that, contrary to rumours, the Powell River Company was not providing individual refugees with funds. Rather, the federal government had allocated each refugee with \$3 for upkeep costs.⁵⁰ In Ottawa, government officials monitored reports of how the Sopron staff and students were being perceived and received on the

46 By August 1958, the federal government had spent \$105,000 on transportation for the Soproners and \$347,190 on accommodation and maintenance costs. UBC had contributed \$82,595 so that the average cost per immigrant came to \$1482.95. LAC, DCI, RG26, vol. 111, file 3-24-12-2, Part II, "Hungarian Refugees — Sopron," Memo for the acting Deputy Minister from the Acting Director, 26 August 1958. Officials were reluctant to provide additional funding since "we've already done more than for any other group." Ibid., Memorandum to Cabinet, 30 June 1958.

47 *Powell River News* (19 September 1957), 1.

48 LAC, DCI, RG 26, vol. 111, file 3-24-12-2, Part I, "Hungarian Refugees — Sopron," 5 March 1957, P.W. Bird to C.E.S. Smith. Government officials later attributed the withdrawal of the Powell River Company's initial financial offer to pressure from union groups. Ibid., 10 January 1957. Bird wrote C.E.S. Smith with news that Mr. Jones of the Powell River company expected Ottawa to fund the Sopron group to the extent of \$3 "per head, per day, for a period of one year."

49 *Debates of the House of Commons* (Ottawa: House of Commons, 1957), 666.

50 *Powell River News* (14 February 1957), 1.

coast.⁵¹ W.P. Bird, the District Superintendent of Immigration, reported that local residents in Powell River had an increasingly positive impression of the refugees due “in a great measure ... to the attitude of both the faculty and the students.” Jack Pickersgill noted this fact “with great satisfaction.”⁵² University officials also sought to reassure their students about any possible threat from the Soproners. Economic conditions in the province were good, but officials still worried.⁵³ Dean George Allen informed readers of the *University of British Columbia Reports*, “All Canada is short of trained foresters An extra 200 graduates spread over (four years) should be of substantial help to shorthanded employers.”⁵⁴

Along with official pronouncements, media coverage of the Soproners was instrumental in shaping the public’s perception of the refugees. News stories often carried light-hearted anecdotes meant to diffuse any deep-seated apprehensions. The *Vancouver Sun* told its readers that when the Hungarian students first arrived “few could speak any English, and they carried their only possessions in paper bags. Now, most of them speak English quite freely, have saved money to pay for their tuition, and between them have 13 tons of luggage.”⁵⁵ Massive coverage about innocuous events, such as the donation of a Komondor sheep dog (a Hungarian breed) to the students, rendered their presence at UBC even more harmless. Such coverage was not accidental. Jim Banham, Information Officer at UBC, wrote the editor of the *Powell River News* to thank him for his coverage of the students’ experience in Canada. “I notice a lot of material about the University gets into the *News* and for this I am grateful. We have a rough time with the Vancouver dailies sometime and I’m always glad to see that we are getting our message across in the hinterland.”⁵⁶

51 LAC, DCI, RG 26, vol. 111, File 3-24-12-2, Part I, “Hungarian Refugees — Sopron,” 28 January 1957. Bird reported on the arrival in British Columbia of the Sopron students and the welcome ceremony that greeted them at UBC.

52 Ibid., P.W. Bird to C.E.S. Smith, 5 January 1957. Bird elaborated further, that the students in Powell River “can sing our national anthem, in full harmony, in a manner that would put most Canadian choirs to shame.” No doubt Pickersgill would have been pleased to observe references to the Sopron students in the *Powell River News* as the community’s “adopted family.” *Powell River News* (8 August 1957).

53 The early 1950s saw the announcement of several large forestry projects by major logging companies, including the Powell River Pulp & Paper Company. Gordon H. Hak, “Populism and the 1952 Social Credit Breakthrough in British Columbia,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 85, no. 2 (June): 282.

54 George S. Allen, “Hungarian forestry school makes historic trip to BC,” *UBC Reports*, (February 1957), 1.

55 *Vancouver Sun* (17 September 1957).

56 UBCA, ISF, box 33, file “Sopron,” letter dated 14 April 1959. The *Powell River News* was very sympathetic in its coverage of the Soproners. It frequently encouraged its readers to make the students welcome, “These people left Hungary with the barest essentials, the clothing they stood in for the most part and without any financial resources These people came here in blind faith that they would be accepted by us. We can do no less than to justify this faith and help them become valuable members of our community and nation.” *Powell River News* (14 February 1957).

While university and government officials concentrated their energies on minimizing the potential economic threat the students posed, they paid less attention to elaborating an anti-communist discourse that would assuage fears amongst the public and the RCMP that there were Communist infiltrators within the group.⁵⁷ In fact, the Sopron faculty and staff often assumed this task themselves, making it abundantly clear to the Canadian public where their loyalties lay. Addressing an audience at the University of New Brunswick, Dean Roller declared,

You may wonder why I am not proficient in English, a language you believe is known throughout the world. The study of English is not encouraged behind the Iron Curtain We chose to leave because the Muscovite Communists overwhelmed our defenceless nation and it would have been pointless to await certain death, or worse, slavery; which is the award of those who resist Soviet tyranny.”⁵⁸

Upon arriving on the UBC campus, the president of the Sopron Student Federation Club, Miklos Gratzer, sent a “Greeting Letter to Our Fellow Students from Hungarian Forestry University,” in which he explained, “we discuss politics passionately. It grieves us, if we hear of the despotism or the trampling of the laws in any part of the world because we were the witnesses of the brutal oppression of our nation.”⁵⁹

Such comments had mixed results in Vancouver where the city was already showing evidence of the polarized politics that characterized provincial and federal elections in the latter half of the twentieth century.⁶⁰ By the 1950s, the city could boast a healthy mix of both left and right-wing politics. The Communist Party of Canada was in evidence and, despite its small numbers,

57 Reg Whitaker, *Double Standard: The Secret History of Canadian Immigration* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys Publishers, 1987), 85. Whitaker concludes, “there is no evidence that among the tens of thousands who arrived here there was any appreciable number of trained agents for Moscow; on the other hand there is abundant evidence that these refugees played a strongly anti-Communist role in the ethnic politics of major Canadian cities such as Toronto.”

58 Sopron Alumni UBC, 72.

59 *The Ubyssy* (24 September 1957).

60 Donald E. Blake, *Two Political Worlds: Parties and Voting in British Columbia* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985). In 1935, the province elected three CCF candidates to office. The most dramatic split came in 1952 when British Columbia’s lieutenant-governor had to intervene in the provincial election and award the election to the Social Credit Party. The loser in this contest was the CCF, even though it had garnered more votes than any other party in the province. The political divisions that characterize the province have been elaborated by several scholars, including William Christian and Colin Campbell, *Political Parties and Ideologies in Canada* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, c1990) and Ivan Akumovic, *Socialism in Canada: A Study of the CCF-NDP in Federal and Provincial Politics* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978).

appeared threatening to establishment circles. In February 1956, the *Vancouver Sun* ran a series of articles that exposed the “Communist menace in BC,” and warned of Communist plans to “penetrate church groups, parent-teacher associations, community associations, everything.”⁶¹ In the 1930s, the Vancouver city police started keeping detailed accounts of communist activity in the city and the electoral successes of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation in the same period revealed a distinct socialist trend in some Vancouver circles.⁶² However, by the time the Sopron students made their way to British Columbia, the Social Credit party was entrenched in provincial office and left-wing ideas were largely excluded from mainstream discourse.⁶³ Similarly, major media outlets were quite conservative and adopted anti-communist stances in their editorials and news stories. Newspapers frequently profiled migrants and refugees from communism to celebrate their heroism and the Canadian way of life.⁶⁴ A similar editorial bent can be discerned in the coverage of the Hungarian refugees in Vancouver. The Royal Canadian Legion’s claims that Communists “were sparking a claim to discredit” efforts to help the Hungarian refugees received wide coverage. In contrast, New Democratic Party Bert Herridge’s comments in the House of Commons to the effect that the government should discontinue its “extravagant” financial support for the Sopron Group,⁶⁵ and charges made by Nigel Morgan (member of Canada’s Communist Party and the International Woodworkers Union) that “the Soprons are merely a group of

61 *Vancouver Sun* (13 February 1956). Tom Alsbury’s exposés ran daily until 17 February 1956. The focus of his rhetoric was the trade unions operating in the province at that time.

62 Barman, 254. Barman describes the party’s platform as the “establishment of a socialist government by democratic means.” Donald Blake recounts “the reaction of the major newspapers and business opinion to the arrival of the CCF was uniformly hostile. They described the party as the captive of ultra-radicals and communists aiming at to pillage successful industry.” See “Politics on the Pacific,” *Readings in BC History* (Richmond, B.C.: Open Learning Agency, c1989), 487.

63 Barman, 304. Barman writes “the communist presence in the BC labour movement, very evident at the end of the war, was isolated.”

64 A few representative samples include the *Vancouver Province* profile on 2 September 1953 in which 30 year old Bruno Milikovich “says he’d rather carry luggage for capitalist than practice law under the Cominform’s heel.” The article title was “Doctor of Laws Now Doorman.” In November 1956, the *Province* featured Frank Pasco who escaped Hungary in 1947 and became treasurer of the West Vancouver Board of Trade and an international director of the Rotary Club. *The Province* (24 November 1956). The paper also charged, in an annual series called “Communism in BC,” that “among the most fertile fields for communist infiltration are many foreign language groups.” The paper claimed that “since many of these immigrants read only foreign-language newspapers controlled by communists, they are particularly susceptible to subversive influences.” However, the paper thought that displaced persons were especially well placed to be able to “spread the real truth” because they had been victims of “Red terrorism in Europe.” *The Province* (2 February 1949).

65 *Vancouver Sun* (6 March 1959), cited in Tarnocai, 92.

unfortunate frothings left over from the Hungarian Revolution,”⁶⁶ received far less media play. What coverage they did receive was rather critical.

The mood on the UBC campus in 1956 appears to have mirrored the mixed politics in evidence in Vancouver. Much like the city, the campus had been contested terrain for the right and left for several decades. During the university’s early years, the leader of the Canadian Commonwealth Federation, J.S. Woodsworth sought out UBC students and staff in the hopes of establishing a labour studies group. In 1923, a member of the Socialist Party boasted that “the student body of the University of British Columbia was the nucleus of the coming revolution.”⁶⁷ An official history of the university asserts that despite charges that the university was “a hot-bed of Communism, there was no overwhelming support for radical ideas. Tim Buck, Howard Scott and the apologists for the Italian Government were equally criticized, and the general tone of student opinion was mildly liberal.”⁶⁸ During World War II, the university was galvanized in support of the country’s efforts in Europe and Asia.⁶⁹ After Igor Gouzenko’s defection in 1949, the chilly political climate on campus was reflected in the student government’s vote “against allowing a peace council to form on campus because ‘it might become a Communist front organization’.”⁷⁰ A few years later, when a Student Communist Club formed on campus, it boasted only a few members and its activities were rather limited.⁷¹ The Student Peace Movement was the only other left wing club to appear at UBC

66 Ibid, 92.

67 Steve Hewitt, *Spying 101: the RCMP’s secret activities at Canadian universities, 1917–1997*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, c2002), 45.

68 Logan, 135.

69 Elaine Bernard, “A University at War: Japanese Canadians at UBC During World War II,” *BC Studies* 35 (Autumn 1977): 36–55.

70 Hewitt, 90.

71 UBCA, Alma Mater Society Fonds (hereafter AMS), box 24 file 15-44. Article II of the constitution of the “Student communist Club” reads: “the purpose of the club shall be 1) to promote discussion of Marxist-Leninist ideas among students at this university 2) to present to the students the Communist viewpoint on current issues and 3) to participate in the affairs of the UBC Parliamentary Council.” The club had 20 members in 1965. *The Ubyyssey* (21 January 1965). The possibility that this club was still of interest to the RCMP, despite its size, exists. Recent literature on the presence of the RCMP on Canadian campuses from the 1930s to the 1990s includes Larry Hannant’s *Infernal Machine: Investigating the Loyalty of Canada’s Citizens* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995) and Hewitt. Hannant argues “the infernal machine, which was sparked to life by the Canadian state’s fervent determination to identify and suppress the supporters of domestic communism, was built without brakes, and roll on it did,” 253. Hewitt maintains that the RCMP was always interested in anyone who was to the left of the political spectrum: “in order to understand why the RCMP maintained a lengthy interest in universities and university-related activities, it is important to note that espionage occupies a secondary role compared to subversion, the founding fear of the security state,” 11.

in this period and it was frequently singled out by the editorial board of *The Ubyyssey* for its “ban the bomb” views and the speakers it chose to invite to campus.⁷² Nevertheless, an exposé in the *Vancouver Province* charged, “Communists are well represented at UBC ... they make up in vocal activity what they lack in numbers.”⁷³

The evidence of a diversity of political views, including occasional pro-communist sentiments in both the city of Vancouver and on the UBC campus in 1956, serves as a reminder of how important it was for government officials to control the movement and settlement of and influence the narrative surrounding the establishment of the Sopron students at UBC. Nevertheless, they could only direct the discourse so far. Local agents, such as the media, university officials, or municipal and provincial politicians, also participated in the formation of a Sopron identity. Ironically, the Soproners probably had the least agency in shaping the nature of their settlement and image in Canada. At UBC, the Soproners undertook to establish a place for themselves on campus, but they could not divest themselves of their dependency on the Canadian state and university authorities. As a result, the Sopron students were always speaking and operating from a position of weakness and they were dependent on officials and other students at UBC for the vehicles by which to express themselves. They controlled neither the form nor the content of the information disseminated about them.

It was during the Powell River period that the Sopron group’s dependency on support from the federal government became particularly palpable. When the federal government first offered to accommodate the Sopron faculty at UBC, it committed itself only to providing transportation and basic funds to the group. Federal officials expected that after their initial language training students would be able to secure employment and support their own studies. The Sopron administrators had a very different impression of what the government’s obligations should be, since tuition was assumed by the state in Hungary. Likewise, UBC’s administration rebuffed any attempts by Ottawa to transfer costs to their institution.⁷⁴ The federal government therefore spent much of the first two years that the Sopron Forestry Faculty was in Canada trying to secure summer employment for the staff and students, canvassing

72 *The Ubyyssey* (27 October 1959).

73 City of Vancouver Archives (hereafter CVA), Pamphlet Collection, 571-C-6. f.462, “Communism in British Columbia,” 17. The same pamphlet claimed that the “Reds” had infiltrated the National Federation of Canadian University Students. Regarding the activities of Communist youth groups, the paper concluded “their actions may seem juvenile and trivial, but they are being trained in the hard school of worldwide communist policy, trained as future fighters for the Soviet revolution,” 19.

74 LAC, DCI, RG 26, vol. 111, file 3-24-12-1, Part III, “Hungarian Refugees — Sopron.”

sympathetic parties for financial support.⁷⁵ According to historian Peter Hidas, private industry was not very forthcoming with offers and “both the students and the professors had a difficult time obtaining summer jobs. The hoped-for assistance from the lumber industry never materialized.”⁷⁶ Officials in the Department of Citizenship and Immigration inquired broadly about whether there were positions available in employment programs administered by the Departments of Agriculture, Indian Affairs, Parks, or Fisheries and Oceans.⁷⁷ Their inquiries met with only moderate success as many of their colleagues believed priority should be given to Canadian citizens or First Nations peoples.⁷⁸ This lack of interest caused immigration officials to rely heavily on local communities, welfare societies and student organizations for assistance.⁷⁹ Officials explained their situation quite bluntly, “the function of the Immigration Branch is to recruit immigrants. It is not its purpose nor has it the facilities to handle social problems, and therefore the help of the provinces and all other social agencies and organizations in the country, is needed.”⁸⁰ Much of this administrative responsibility fell to organizations such as the National Council of Canadian Universities and the National Federation of Canadian University Students. The funding, however, continued to come from the federal government. The power structures that shaped the Hungarian students’ experi-

75 It appears that senior ministers in the St. Laurent government used their political contacts to great advantage in this enterprise: Jack Pickersgill solicited support from the International Order of the Daughters of Empire and the Atkinson Foundation, while Lester B. Pearson contacted the Ford Foundation to see about the possibility of scholarships. LAC, DCI, RG 26, vol. 146, file, 3-41-22, Part 2, “Admission to Canada of Hungarian Refugee students.” When earnings proved insufficient, the federal government agreed to continue its financial support of the group with monthly allowances. The Diefenbaker government altered the terms of its support in 1958 causing considerable distress amongst the Sopron staff and students.

76 Hidas, P. “The Hungarian Refugee Student Movement of 1956–57 and Canada,” Academic Search Complete, <www.webescohost.com> (accessed 27 November 2008).

77 LAC, DCI, RG 26, vol. 111, file 3-24-12-2, Part II, “Hungarian Refugees — Sopron,” 18 February 1958. The form letter from Laval Fortier to his colleagues read in part: “I cannot emphasize too strongly the danger that this imaginative and valuable program may have to be abandoned if summer employment cannot be obtained for these students.”

78 Laval Fortier wrote H.M. Jones, Director of the Indian Branch (also within the DCI) agreeing that “Indians should be employed to the greatest extent possible” in surveying/managing forests on reserves.” He discussed the “matter further with the Minister who suggested that, in view of the difficulties for Canadian students to obtain employment during the present summer, the formula should be the employment of Indians whenever possible and the employment of one Hungarian Refugee for every non-Indian worker employed.” LAC, DCI, RG 26, vol. 111, file 3-24-12-2, Part II, “Hungarian Refugees — Sopron,” 8 May 1958. Officials secured approximately one 150 jobs in the civil service for Sopron students during the summer of 1958.

79 Ibid., vol. 146, file, 3-41-22, Part 1, “Admission to Canada of Hungarian Refugee students.”

80 Ibid., meeting with Citizenship and Immigration, External Affairs, Labour, Unemployment Insurance Commission, Voluntary Agencies, 27 November 1956.

ence in Canada therefore existed at multiple levels and in multiple sites. The relationship between the Sopron students and their peers at UBC is particularly illuminating for understanding how the ritualized refugee process impeded the ability of the Soproners to shape their own identities in Canada.

Student complicity

At first, UBC's students did not seem especially concerned with the events in Hungary. Prior to the Soviet invasion, when tanks rolled into Budapest and images of violence and bloodshed were broadcast around the world, the Alma Mater Society (AMS) expressed its reluctance to give an opinion or organize support until the "political nature" of the Hungarian Revolution was clear. The organization feared it would be setting a dangerous precedent if it became involved too prematurely.⁸¹ *The Ubyyssey* railed against the student government's attitude: "We firmly believe that the representative body should have had the 'guts' to express what most of us feel — a sincere appreciation of the efforts of the Hungarian students in their fight for freedom — and to organize some tangible support in terms of blood, money and clothing."⁸² By the end of November, the level of engagement amongst the students appeared to be rising. Over 1,000 students attended a ceremony at the UBC Armoury to "honour the efforts of the Hungarian student patriots," and significant funds were raised to sponsor three students to study at UBC.⁸³ Still, the student body was most comfortable supporting established organizations, such as the World University Service, as opposed to spontaneous relief efforts, such as those that Dr. M. Uvdardy (head of Vancouver's Hungarian Liberation Committee) in the Department of Zoology wanted to head.⁸⁴

The initial lacklustre campus response, as manifested by the AMS deliberations, may have prompted university officials to undertake an intensive

81 UBCA, AMS, box 48 "Sopron," letter dated 31 October 1956. The president of the AMS justified the organization's position by noting that they had never sent aid before and "there are a great many students in the world who have a great need, but if we acted on this basis we feel we would be sponsoring welfare drives every month." Still, there were pockets of activism on campus. In a letter dated 13 November 1956, Bill Davis (President of Agricultural Undergraduate Society) wrote Don Jabour of the AMS to explain that "moved and seconded in an AUS Council meeting to-day 'that the AUS recommend to the AMS that funds be solicited on campus' to be used to further the 'Western Cause' in Hungary and to petition the AMS to support this cause." The vote was unanimous with no abstentions 22-0."

82 *The Ubyyssey*, 1 November 1956. The AMS started organizing relief at the end of November.

83 "Sopron — A new life: The Background: WUS Helpful," *The Ubyyssey* (28 February 1958). This fund-raising took place before the group learned of the Soproners sponsorship to Canada.

84 UBCA, AMS, box 3 "Minutes, March 1.54–March 24.58," Minutes dated 5 November 1956. In contrast, *The Province* celebrated Dr. Uvdardy and his efforts on 15 November 1956, under the headline, "I hope my sister is dead ... it will be better for her" (Hungarians Weep For Their Homeland)."

information campaign to acclimatize the student body to the arrival of Sopron students in their midst. The strategy that officials employed most frequently in discussing the arrival and benefits of having the Sopron students on campus was to highlight the cultural aspects of the group's contribution to Canadian society.⁸⁵ In January, a few weeks before the students arrived in British Columbia, the university published a "Statement to Ubysey." It explained:

The group includes musicians as well as athletes, among others soccer players of note, fencing experts, and tennis champions of Hungary. They bring with the cultural traditions centuries old. There is little doubt but that their impact on UBC will be considerable and lasting. They in turn will learn much from our own students that will be of value in their new life in a bewilderingly strange land We foresee many problems, none of them unsolvable but all requiring mutual tolerance and understanding and effort.⁸⁶

Continuous references to the Sopron school's interest in sports and music led the AMS to organize campaigns to collect musical instruments and athletic equipment on behalf of the students.⁸⁷ These efforts were duly applauded in the student newspaper.⁸⁸ *The Ubysey* also held the Hungarian students up for praise for their school spirit. The paper admonished a lethargic local student body, "UBC students should be ashamed that these people (Sopron students), who knew next to nothing about basketball, *who do not even attend the university*, and who know the feeling of a defeat more bitter than any UBC student will ever experience, had to show the 500 Varsity students in attendance how to support and inspire their team."⁸⁹ (emphasis added) If the records of the AMS Society and contemporary issues of *The Ubysey* are any indication, the presence of the Soproners on campus was obviously noted by the general student populace.⁹⁰ But tracking the level of the engagement is a more challenging enterprise, as the Sopron students continued to be differentiated from their peers, by the physical spaces they occupied, their curriculum, and their politics, throughout their time at UBC. The division between the Soproners and the rest of the student body is reflected dramatically in the activities of the UBC

85 *UBC Reports* 4, no. 4 (February 1958) mentions the folk dances that the Sopron students presented at the UBC Open House.

86 *The Ubysey* (15 January 1957).

87 UBCA, ISF, box 33, file "Sopron," "The Resettlement of a Hungarian University in Canada: Part I by George S. Allen." Dean Allen enthused, "One place where the language difficulties proved no obstacle was the soccer field. The Hungarians, professionals at the game, quickly defeated every Canadian team in the neighbourhood."

88 *Ibid.*, AMS Fonds, box 3 "Minutes, March 1.54–March 24.58."

89 *The Ubysey* (12 February 1957).

90 "Sopron — A new life: The Background: WUS Helpful." *The Ubysey* devoted almost an entire edition to interviews with Sopron students after their arrival on campus in January 1957.

Forestry Club. In 1957, the editors of the Club's yearbook, *The Forester*, dedicated the annual publication to the "School of Forestry, Sopron University," as its departure from Hungary "was a manifestation of a great unified courage of conviction that will stand in the annals of history as a monument to the cause of freedom."⁹¹ But beyond this, there is no mention of any involvement of the Soproners in the club's activities. The students are not included among the graduates and the Sopron staff are absent from the faculty pages. Only in 1961, upon the graduation of 140 Sopron students, is there a message from Dean Roller "to the Forest Club" expressing his thanks to UBC.⁹²

In the university context, rituals such as hazing or frosh week are undertaken by students to initiate newcomers into a select community, creating a sense of solidarity and raising the level of group consciousness.⁹³ The Sopron group experienced none of these. The rituals its members participated in were all based on their designation as refugees rituals.

The greatest power that the students held was in their ability to make events in Hungary and Europe more immediate and relevant to the student body in Vancouver. Each year, until the faculty disbanded in 1962, Sopron students marked the anniversary of the revolt by wearing the uniforms that had been banned by the communists, and marching across campus. *The Ubyyssey* described the first anniversary as follows:

One hundred-fifty Hungarian students braved the rain on Wednesday to march in silent commemoration of last year's Hungarian Revolt. At 12:30 the Sopron students congregated at the flag pole on the Main Mall. From there they marched bare-headed behind their banner bearer, Geza Toth to the Memorial Gymnasium.⁹⁴

Dean K.J. Roller later complained that the Soproners marched alone and this may explain in part his assertion that the Sopron Division received very little sympathy and support from the students at the UBC.⁹⁵ Roller has suggested the initial "fervour" that greeted Sopron's arrival in Canada and "which reflected the peoples' ardent support of the Hungarian Revolution, did not spread as far west as the city of Vancouver."⁹⁶ In his memoirs, Roller charges:

91 UBC Forest Club, *UBC Forester* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1957), 7.

92 Ibid., 1961, 22.

93 Keith Walden, "Hazes, Hustles, Scraps and Stunts: Initiations at the University of Toronto, 1880-1925" in *Youth, University and Canadian Society*, eds. Paul Axelrod and John G. Reid (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989).

94 *The Ubyyssey* (24 October 1957).

95 Sopron Alumni UBC, 72.

96 Ibid., 72.

Mainstream students at UBC viewed the activities of students in the Sopron Division with indifference and, in some cases, outright hostility. The majority of the Canadian students knew very little about the Soproners and their struggle. What they did know they often did not understand or could not relate to because they were not familiar with the issues and events which had a bearing on the Soproners' lives.⁹⁷

Other Soproners recall a more supportive environment. Antal Kozak remembers that "Canadian students of that day were helpful to me." Kozak describes animosity caused by the job market situation as a "perfectly natural feeling," and one that did not sour his view of the Canadian students.⁹⁸ Significantly, evidence points to much greater engagement with cold war issues after the arrival of the Soproners on campus.

In 1959, news stories began to appear (repeated on the Ed Sullivan show) that a group of 150 students had been found by the Soviet authorities and were about to be executed for their part in the 1956 revolt. Dean Roller claims that UBC failed to engage with this issue,⁹⁹ but records from the Alma Mater Society and coverage in *The Ubyyssey* point to the contrary.¹⁰⁰ Peter Meekison, then president of the AMS, was instrumental in organizing a national petition that urged Prime Minister Diefenbaker to raise the issue at the United Nations. He was commended by other student presidents in Canada.¹⁰¹ The presence of the Sopron students on campus sparked action on the part of an allegedly apathetic student body. It was with great embarrassment and relief that the world later learned that the news reports were false.

In contemplating the settlement of the Sopron group at UBC, it appears that while the bulk of the student body at UBC was aware of the Soproners' presence on campus, they engaged with them largely through the lens of the dominant refugee discourses perpetuated by university and government officials in media outlets in the city and on campus. As reflected in the 1957 dedication of the *UBC Forester*, the students represented victims of persecution, above all else. Such depictions do not mean that the possibility of establishing personal relationships did not exist (quite the contrary, a number of Sopron students married Canadians), but that the student discourse on campus was framed within the larger structure of a refugee ritual. The final stage of the ritual process, that of public commemoration, served as a reminder that the students were indeed different from their peers. On campus, anniversaries that first

97 Ibid, 119.

98 UBCA, ISF, box 33, file "Sopron," transcript of interview with Antal Kozak.

99 Sopron Alumni UBC, 119.

100 *The Ubyyssey* (20 November 1959).

101 UBCA, AMS, box 35, folder 23-1, "Hungary 1959-60." The student president at Queen's University apologized to Meekison for his school's mediocre response, "Our conservative isolationism is still fairly entrenched," 6 November 1959.

celebrated the events in Hungary later shifted to commemorations of the Sopron Forestry Faculty's arrival at UBC. The students became a living archive, linked to a specific time and place in the history of the Cold War. Such ceremonies widened the gap between the Soproners and other UBC students as the Cold War progressed and the general atmosphere on campus shifted in the 1960s.

Commemoration

The public activities commemorating the Soproners' journey to Canada and their time at UBC complete the ritual initiated in 1956, when Canadian officials first identified and selected the group's members as desirable candidates for migration. Ceremonies attended all of the major markers in the Sopron Forestry Faculty's journey and settlement in Canada. There were welcome ceremonies in the Maritimes, in British Columbia, and at UBC. The students themselves observed the anniversary of the revolution by parading through campus. Graduation ceremonies marked the ultimate step in the passage of the Sopron group to Canada. At the final convocation, Dean Roller declared, "we are convinced that as we become Canadian citizens in due course, we shall contribute in an important way by sinking our Sopron roots deeply into our new country and placing our strength and resources at its disposal." Roller urged his audience to take care of their freedom.¹⁰²

By the time the final Hungarian refugee student graduated from the campus of UBC in 1962, the university environment was becoming increasingly alien to the members of the Sopron group, whom had believed so ardently in their battle against the Soviet Union. During the 1960s, the university became one of the most active centres of New Left ideology and philosophy in Canada. The RCMP believed UBC to have more subversives than any other campus in Canada.¹⁰³ Such fears were intensified when Jerry Rubin visited the campus in 1968 and lit marijuana cigarettes rolled in American dollar bills as a protest against his country's foreign policies.¹⁰⁴ As the New Left ideology became increasingly popular, the legacy of the Soproners became more confused. Dean Roller had to defend his group's anti-communist stance in *The Ubyyssey* on 8 February 1962. He also acknowledged that by the 1960s, it was "difficult to understand the Canadian students' enthusiasm towards us during our trip west" in 1957 because there had begun "a definite drift among university students towards maintaining a policy of co-existence with the Communists."¹⁰⁵ The

¹⁰² Ibid, 123.

¹⁰³ Hewitt, 120.

¹⁰⁴ The American activist is best known for his lead in organizing anti-Vietnam war protests in the United States in the 1960s.

¹⁰⁵ Sopron Alumni UBC, 72.

Sopron students became part of the establishment, through the many commemorations and ceremonies in which they participated and by pursuing the academic and career goals that their government and institutional sponsors had envisioned for them, and this distanced them from the currents of change on campus.

Once the students left campus, their identity and their legacy became even more solidly attached to the early years of the Cold War. "Sopron House" on Acadia Road, a gift from the Sopron alumni, is now home to faculty and staff housing. It is adorned with a plaque that reads "UBC adopted Sopron, 1956–1961." Over the years, other gifts have appeared and other commemorative events have been organized.¹⁰⁶ Now important anniversaries serve as a nucleus for reunions and remembering. On the 25th anniversary of the group's arrival, Jack Pickersgill returned to UBC to celebrate along with James Sinclair, Norman Mackenzie, and Dean Roller, all of whom were instrumental in arranging the Sopron group's journey to Canada. Similarly, ceremonies were organized to mark both the 40th and 50th anniversaries of Sopron's arrival at UBC.¹⁰⁷ Once a month, Sopron alumni gather in Vancouver to reminisce. Their numbers are fewer, but the sense of having experienced momentous historical events and made fundamental contributions to the UBC and Canadian communities endures. Adopting the government's view of their most distinguishing characteristic, they are now the first to call themselves "freedom fighters."¹⁰⁸ Each of these events operates as a reminder of the differences that separated the Sopron students from the rest of Canadian society, even as they reinforce the connections that bind the Hungarian refugees to Canada.

Traces of the Ritual: Tiananmen Square (1989)

The ritual process that the Sopron students experienced was never again repeated to the same extreme in Canada. Since 1956, thousands of refugee students have come to Canadian universities to pursue their studies, but they have come as individuals, sponsored by private organizations such as World University Service. The closest parallel that can be drawn to the Sopron students' experience in 1956 occurred over 30 years later when Chinese authorities crushed pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square. In June 1989, students once again turned to foreign countries for shelter and support. In response, the

106 In 2001, Les Jozsa and fellow students donated a hand-carved gate made of yellow cedar and emblazoned with folk symbols and forestry crests to the university. Gordon Hamilton, "Gate at UBC honours Hungary forestry exiles," *The Vancouver Sun* (24 November 2001), F1.

107 Patrick Murphy, "Forestry school transplants reunite," *Victoria Times-Colonist* (9 October 1998), B4.

108 See K.J. Roller, *Sopron chronicle: Hungarian foresters in the western world, 1919-1986*, (Toronto: Rakoczi Foundation, 1986).

Canadian government announced, “we will do everything we can for the Chinese people”¹⁰⁹ and proceeded to extend visas and offer permanent residency to thousands of Chinese students already studying in Canada.¹¹⁰ Canadian authorities discerned many economic advantages if the Chinese students could be established permanently, echoing many of the arguments made in the fallout from the Hungarian Revolution.¹¹¹ Similarly, the government may have also desired to score propaganda points against the Chinese communists just as it had done against the Soviets in 1956. Xiao Feng Lui maintains, “the event provided a context for western countries, including Canada, to confront communism and to endorse western values of democracy and freedom.”¹¹² However, in contrast to the way the Sopron students were objectified throughout their movement and settlement in Canada, government authorities invested little energy in depicting the Chinese students as innocent victims in need of support. This time, there was no “freedom train,” no dramatic rescue, no mass celebrations.¹¹³ Rather, the government simply changed immigration regulations so that students could stay longer and allowed the dramatic video and photographic footage from Tiananmen Square to make the case for the legitimacy of their project.¹¹⁴

As a result the Chinese students who stayed in Canada after the Tiananmen Square crackdown had a fundamentally different experience from what the Sopron refugee students lived through in 1956. While the Chinese students still participated in a tightly controlled migration in that they had to apply to have visas extended and government-approved family sponsorships ensured there was no danger of “generating a large inflow of refugees from China,”¹¹⁵ they

109 *Vancouver Sun* (21 July 1989).

110 By August 1989, 3,200 of the 4,800 Chinese students in Canada at the time of the crackdown had been granted permanent residency in principle.

111 Some scholars don’t believe that the sanctuary offered to students in the post-Tiananmen period constitutes a refugee program at all. “Although the policy was put into place to protect Chinese citizens who might face persecution if they returned to China and was based on humanitarian and compassionate grounds, it was not regarded as a refugee programme.” The fact that people were admitted under the independent immigrant category and family members fell into the regular family class category is significant evidence in support of this theory. Xiao Feng Lui, “Refugee Flow or Brain-Drain? The Humanitarian Policy and Post-Tiananmen Mainland Chinese Immigration to Canada,” *International Journal of Population Geography* 3 (1997): 14–29.

112 *Ibid.*, 20. Newspaper accounts stress Canada’s economic interests in China, suggesting that the government was actually trying to avoid embarrassing China. “China Doing without Aid,” *Globe and Mail* (11 September 1989), B5).

113 Xiao Feng Lui and Glen Norcliffe, “Closed windows, open doors: Geopolitics and post-1949 Mainland Chinese immigration to Canada,” *Canadian Geographer* 40, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 306–20.

114 Minister Barbara McDougall announced that people wouldn’t have to leave as long as the situation in China was threatening to them. Officers were instructed to be sympathetic to applications and sponsorships in the family class categories were accelerated.

115 Liu, 20.

had considerably more latitude and freedom of choice. It was up to them to determine when and where to apply for visa extensions or permanent residency and they did so on a case-by-case basis.

The basic similarities that link the Chinese refugees to the Soproners, that of being students and victims of violence perpetrated by authoritarian communist regimes, and the dramatic differences between the two groups (namely the degree of ritualization and objectification they experienced at the behest of Canadian authorities) points to the unique position the Soproners occupied after they accepted entry on the terms and conditions offered by UBC and the Canadian government. From the initial stages of their movement to Canada, the Soproners were at the mercy of authorities who desired to be of assistance but who had their own goals and objectives to fulfill. Most importantly, Canadian officials wanted the Soproners to prove the virtues and benefits of western democracies by being successful students and employees.

To minimize resistance against the students the state protected them, providing language and civic education and securing employment for them until they could be "released" into Canadian society. Even then, the students were sheltered; isolated on the UBC campus in housing and classroom facilities that physically separated them from the rest of the student body. Upon graduation, the students disappeared from the gaze of the state and university authorities, only to reappear for anniversaries and commemorations. Because the Sopron students were dependent on Canadian authorities for financial and ideological support, they were more vulnerable to a ritualization process: agreeing to the terms of their selection, movement, and settlement at UBC and actively participating in commemorative activities.

By thinking of the Sopron group's movement to Canada as a ritual in which the state shaped the identity of the participants as a group, one can interrogate the power dynamics that structured the movement of these 200 students to Canada. Clearly, the Canadian state was in a dominant position, dictating the terms of entry and settlement. Yet other actors played a significant role in shaping the Soproners' experience at UBC. Most notably, the university's own administration and student body, as well as local media outlets who presented images and stories about the refugees. The history of the Soproners in Canada is therefore a blend of narratives: universally symbolic, nationally successful, and locally curious. What is absent is any sense of the Soproners themselves directing the discourse on their own refugee experiences. Ironically, their determination to remain together as a faculty facilitated their objectification and ritualization.¹¹⁶ As a group, the Sopron students and staff played to the narra-

116 Their group identity is an enduring one. In 2006, when the Association of BC Forest Professionals nominated "five of BC's most influential foresters," the entire Sopron School of Forestry was included. Gordon Hamilton, "Who stands tallest among the great foresters of B.C.?" *The Vancouver Sun* (11 October 2006), D3.

tive set out by the Canadian state: expressing gratitude for the opportunity to resettle and affirming Canadian Cold War convictions by vocalizing their passionate disregard for the politics of the Soviet Union. While they may have self-identified as Soproners or “freedom fighters,” they were still speaking to a limited category of experience that authorities had outlined for them, that of “cold war refugee.” The identity they assumed through their rites of passage to Canadian society did not ease their entry into campus life at UBC. In fact, in many ways it kept them isolated and tied them to a moment in time that went in and out of fashion with the political ebbs and flows of the cold war years. Rituals can therefore be a kind of trap, one that chains a refugee or a migrant to a state-constructed category of identity.

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