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# “Does it matter where they come from? This is the duty of humanity”<sup>1</sup>

Iván Győző Somlai

Iván's career with universities and private consulting has encompassed development cooperation around the globe. Be it strengthening local planning with indigenous communities; improving extractive industries through better governance; uplifting suppressed minorities; improving social services delivery, Iván approaches each opportunity collaboratively, with sensitivity to cultures, religions, ethnicities and genders and true local needs. Coming himself from a refugee background, his empathy towards displaced populations is exemplified through his facilitation with humanitarian and disaster response programmes, conflict mitigation as well as human trafficking publications. Iván is the Director of Ethnobureaucratia and is on the Editorial Board of the Pakistan Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies.

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## Abstract

*The author describes his personal experience as a young refugee from a revolution in Europe, through his later intimate contact with three refugee communities in the course of decades of work in Asia, and reflects upon the greater context of the numerous issues impacting on decision-making and enveloping the sphere of refugees. Especially in the current tide of millions displaced, it is not possible in times of crises to simply segue in an attempt to harmonize the exceedingly complex situation. All components of the inter-related issues and results, namely causes of flight, reception outside their home countries, plans for resettlement and actual resettlement, as well as retaining some level of communication with those left behind need to be understood through improved, proactive planning and preparation.*

## Introduction

Through personal experience and reflection, I argue how, for a holistic understanding of refugee issues, there needs to be an understanding of the causes for fleeing, the trauma of the escape itself, the importance of how one is received, the preparation for resettlement and the integrative encouragement in the receiving country. My personal recollections and contemporary feelings also attest to the everlasting deplacé imprint that could remain with one, sometimes for life. While the process and format of my personal exposition had been my own, inherently valid reflection and mental process emanating from family marginalia and memories, I do wish to thank the anonymous reviewer who brought to my attention coincidentally and considerably related research and documentation done on personal testimonies and narratives in contexts of

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<sup>1</sup>Nereli olduklarinin önemi var mi? Bubir insanlik görev! Turkish poster quote from the 2015 Japan-Turkish co-produced film "Ertuğrul 1890 - Kainan 1890".

*Keywords: refugee, migration, immigration, Hungary, Canada, Nepal*

emotionally riveting trauma (e.g. Edkins, 2003 and 2004; Pratt, 2012; Pratt, Johnston, and Banta, 2015). These and other writings have helped me bridge an oft perceived gap between existent wider literature and the compulsion for personal divulgence.



The author with his mother in Hungary 1955

### **I was a refugee. Hungary, October-December 1956.**

Before my journey began, I recalled daily warnings by my parents to watch very carefully what I said in my grade 3 class at Pannónia Public School to “that boy,” who happened to live one floor above our apartment (we, in #3, 5th floor; the boy and his parents, in #3, 6th floor); and whose father was known to be with the dreaded AVO (Államvédelmi Osztály, the State Security Department), the secret police. Nazi control had been replaced by Soviet control. But authoritarianism seemed analogous to most of the hoi polloi; and at some point, collective patience had run its course against the AVO as well as the Soviet heavy hand. The Stalinist forces invaded and tried to protect the government from the practices of the security services (that boy’s father was among the hundreds lynched from trees in the street in the intoxicating turbulence of Soviet tanks, cannonades against churches, radio stations, apartment buildings, government offices); and the demonstrations, invectives, counter efforts with Molotov cocktails, rifles, grenades and reasoning with the Soviets when their overwhelming force became imminently futile.

The revolution-in-progress further created distrust and had impeded schooling, safety, mobility, commerce, health and other social services and distribution of essential goods. Even before the uprising we depended on capturing pigeons on our kitchen window sill to supplement our diet. In the maelstrom of an increasingly violent revolution and profound uncertainty, my parents decided to attempt an escape, rather than risk ostensible incarceration or extermination as happened to many of our family members during World War II.

On November 4th at early dawn in a radio broadcast, Prime Minister Imre Nagy pleaded with the world - repeatedly until 08:00 hours when all stations were shut down by the Soviets - to help counter the overwhelming Soviet incursion and its concomitant strangling of all facets of life throughout the country, but to no avail. Aside from requesting detailed reports and encouraging dialogue, no country, no organization, certainly not the United Nations....no one came to help.

Deploring the exacerbating repression, knowing that sooner or later our attempts to flee would result in consequences once Soviet-inspired total control would be established, my parents were hastily seeking options to leave. Such a decision was not made easily. A whirlpool of memories, balancing of mind and heart, logic and irrationality made a dizzying exercise out of cogent decision-making.

Whom do we tell or ensure we do not tell?

How much to tell me and to trust me not to speak about it? (After all, I was a chatty third grader, bound to have overheard related whispering at home).

What to take?

What if we fail? What might happen wherever we may be caught? Would we be allowed to return to our home? Could my parents resume previous work?

Is the risk worth taking?

Would the future be really better elsewhere?

In the end, as peritraumatic dissociation sets in, a decision is made to flee.

As inconspicuously as possible, we left our apartment in Budapest on December 13th pretending to visit relatives. This meant carrying virtually nothing but some personal papers and photographs. We took a train to a village about 2 kilometres from the Austrian border. Arriving in the late evening, along with two other families who obviously had the same idea, our nervous and chilled group walked toward a fortuitously tall crop of corn. In the distance was a single light: the Austrian border.

Proceeding slowly, silently, eyes fixed on that distant light of liberty sometimes dimmed by a gradually engulfing fog, there was no other sound aside from unavoidably brushing against the stalks. Until.

Until, in Hungarian we heard "*Állj! Fel a kezeikkel, vagy lövünk!*"—Stop! Hands up or we shoot! Three soldiers confronted us about 100 metres from the border and immediately shot flares up to alert their base that some fleeing citizens had been captured. In the next hour and a half, in drizzling rain, wet, tired while awaiting return signals, the soldiers and some of the adults in our group were chatting. One of the soldiers, as it turned out—the one who shot the flare—was born in Liptovský Svätý Mikuláš, Slovakia, once part of Hungary up to the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, but more importantly, where my own mother was born. A bit more sharing of memories led to some mutual

sympathy and the soldier's apology for what he and his comrades had to do, especially after having alerted their base; after which he and his comrades had no choice but to take us back to their barracks, back 3½ hours through that maze of glorious corn to the office where we were documented and released to return to Budapest. Because of the large number of people attempting to escape, there was no room to lock everyone up; it sufficed to document those captured and then deal with them later. Taking an early morning bus back to Budapest, we arrived at our apartment building: imagine now the consternation, the trepidation in seeing on the building's bulletin board a sarcastic message: "Greetings to Mr. Somlai, the free world's brave citizen." Decapitation of AVO did not mean the elimination of spies! The very next morning at 8 o'clock we were called in to a government office for an "interview."

A new opportunity came December 16th to join three other families in a truck driving legally to the Austrian border with a truck full of apples for sale. At least that was what it looked like from behind, where—at the back end of the vehicle—three rows of boxes full of apples were stacked to the roof; the remaining space was crammed with twelve people. I cannot remember all the checkpoints: there had been perhaps four. But we did sail through them all. Until.

Until what became the last checkpoint: to this day, I clearly recall a Russian soldier opening up the truck's side panels, peering in whilst holding up the panel and smiling at us. Once again we were shuttled back to yet another barrack for a repeat documentation and for possible later retribution. Returning to our tiny apartment, we found it already occupied by another family! Our choices had instantly dwindled. We somehow made do with a one-night cramped, nervous and absolutely uncomfortable joint accommodation with people we did not know and could not trust.

The next day, December 17th, an alternative was thankfully offered by the same truck driver: he would drive again to the border, using Russian license plates, paying off all guards along the way and noting what times they would be on duty; if it worked, he would immediately return to Budapest to pick up the previous group, supplemented by yet another two families, so as to arrive at the border by nightfall.

For him it worked. On December 18th, the now 16 desperate freedom seekers piled in, myself and parents with the driver, our compatriots behind us in the open backed truck. Being so visible created an ambivalent, confused emotion: without apple boxes to hide us, it may appear as though we had nothing to hide and were travelling presumably legally; but the visibility likewise exposed us as potential targets in any ensuing encounter "in the wrong place at the wrong time." However, we did progress. Checkpoint No.1: flagged through. Checkpoint No.2: after brief pleasantries, permitted to continue. A long stop in Győr allowed for a meal and a calculated continuation in the dark to arrive at times the paid-off guards were supposed to be on duty. Checkpoint No.3: Allowed to pass. Until.

Until Checkpoint No.4: an unexpected, unscheduled Russian Colonel! It is amazing what one can remember from that age: the driver, left arm sitting on the open window,

The author's immigration document issued on landing in Halifax, N.S. in 1957

fiddling with his silver watch, the Colonel eyeing it, a silent understanding, the gifting, the grateful Colonel then waving us on.

Within about 20 minutes we stopped. It was December 18th, close to midnight. Our driver said we were inside Austria, at a small village called Halbturn. Everyone alighted. A coincidental shooting star marked our arrival to freedom. Relief was palpable, yet unexpected tensions began to arise: we had nothing, aside from some salvaged photographs and no convertible currency. And now what?

Subsequent to local documentation later that day on December 19th, we stayed at the Pension Maxi boarding house, at Seilerstätte 17 in Vienna I. From January 11th, having fortunately received permits for Canada, we were shifted to the Canadian administered Wiener Neustadt Refugee Centre, an old aircraft hangar already hosting several hundred people

of the over 200,000 Hungarians fleeing to Austria. Fortuitously, "(i)n response to public pressure, the Canadian government implemented a special program, offering the Hungarian refugees free transport, instead of loans. More than 37,000 Hungarians were admitted in less than a year" (Brief History, n.d.). While we had relatives in Italy, France, England and Austria, my maternal grandparents and uncle had already settled in Canada following their harrowing escape post World War II. We stood in line for 2-3 hours and signed for some necessary items such as shoes, winter coats, a handbag for my mother and sundry clothing, all donated via the American Joint Distribution Committee.

We continued on January 22nd by train to Trieste, Italy, and boarded the ocean liner Saturnia on January 23rd, 1957 bound for Halifax, landing there on February 12th. Soon we were on a train to Montréal, our destination for a renewed life.

## **Interactions with Tibetans, Bhutanese, Afghans 1976 - 2011.**

During my forty years of involvement throughout Nepal since 1976,<sup>2</sup> I had lived near Tibetan refugee camps and interacted with shopkeepers and trading caravans in both rural and urban settings in Kaski, Mustang, Solu Khumbu, Rasuwa, Kathmandu and Lalitpur Districts.



The author chatting with Tibetan traders in 2008

Whilst working in the northern border areas for over a year, I came across many ailing refugees who had, at considerable risk trudged through ice, rocks and snow on bleeding feet and frostbitten extremities to exhaustedly cross the high altitudes to assumed safety. They were lucky; some of their compatriots were arrested and deported by the Nepali military. Others managed to keep travelling to Kathmandu or eventually to Tibetan communities in India. Some recalled fellow refugee aspirants being shot by Chinese border guards. Seeking freedom has costs: leaving families; enduring possible topographic and physical harm en route, as people have little choice but to cross high passes through which altitude and snow conditions can rapidly debilitate them; separating from cherished personal effects; heading into an uncertain future; relentless eternal longing for one's homeland.

As in any refugee community, some of its members are quite visible while others remain out of sight. Most tourists engage with the more successful segments; in Nepal, this means largely carpet, *thangka*<sup>3</sup> and jewellery vendors. Yet there are thousands under the radar who suffer from sustained poverty and inadequate social support. One common theme amongst most refugee Tibetans is their longing for their lost homeland.<sup>4</sup> While

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<sup>2</sup> By the end of two years as Game Plan '76 Manager and Assistant Coach of Canada's Olympic Water Polo Team, I was getting ulcers from stress relating to the intense internal bickering, politicking and selfish decision-making by the sport's governing body. The ensuing corruption within the Olympics led me to a life-changing post-Olympic epiphany: a spiritual/physical rejuvenation was essential through vigorous mountaineering and 3 months helping at the United Mission to Nepal School in Pokhara, Nepal. That, in turn, begat my intense interest in the Himalayan world, and related academic pursuits and consulting with universities, companies, NGOs and governments.

<sup>3</sup> Tibetan religious paintings, usually on canvas.

<sup>4</sup> The concept of "homeland" elicits diverse understandings, depending on: length of residency in host country; ages and generation of migrants; what had been left behind; desire and ability to integrate; fit of knowledge and skills in host country; linguistic ability; cultural comfort, etc. Tibetans, in particular, more than most other cultures, receive extraordinary amount of support from the international community due to their maintaining a functioning "Government-in-Exile" in Dharamshala, India (which I also visited) coupled with a sustained revitalization of Buddhist and Tibetan spiritual and cultural practices throughout the globe and drawing adherents from western societies.

refugee identification cards had been availed to those arriving between 1959 and 1989, many chose to retain their exiled status with the rapidly fading hope of seeing and resettling in their birthplace, or by now their parents' or grandparents' birthplace. Citizenships have been difficult to obtain, as "Nepal is not party to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 protocol" (Gamble and Ringpapontsag, 2013; Ministry..., 2014; UNHCR, 2014; Department..., 2013), and has no laws concerning refugees or asylum seekers (Ministry, *ibid*); therefore, "refugees in Nepal have no legal status and are viewed as foreigners and non-citizens" (Tibet Justice, 2002) without Nepali citizenship. As a result, Tibetans are unable to legally own property or a business (International Campaign..., 2012; Department of State, *ibid*; Human Rights, 2014) nor even get a driver's licence.

Reality can take a lifetime to sink in....to be absorbed, reflected upon, analysed, understood, to be rejected or accepted or modified; and to embark on changes to synchronize the new reality with one's life! Tibetans keep hoping to still return to their homeland; concomitantly, the reality of that materialising is illusive, as "emotional attachment to symbols and myths of homeland appears to have endured" (Anand, 2000; Nowak, 1984 in Bernabei, 2011), while the accessibility of that dream becoming physically realised is elusive. As a personal attestation, it took around 20 years for me to stop yearning for my Budapest. However, my original homeland had been replaced by Nepal, where after 15 years of intense academic and professional involvement, having travelled to all 75 Districts, having had convivial interactions with royalty and rebels, politicians and proletariat, becoming fluent and earning a wonderful family, I have unconsciously adopted it as my alternative home. Hungary, Canada or Nepal: I seem to remain permanently in symbiosis with *sehnsucht*.

In 1990, yet another wave of refugees arrived in Nepal after their first country of refuge—India—refused to accommodate them: Bhutanese of Nepali origin – Lhotsampaas--either fled on their own or were forced to flee during a period of repressive Bhutanisation by a regime viewed through rose coloured glasses by most western countries. Enforced under this new law was use of only the Dzongkha language (no more Nepali language, despite the community's having lived there since before the 1800s<sup>5</sup>), and of Driglam Namza, the royal dress code (no more *dauraa suruwal* and *topi*, or other simple dress as was the custom of the Nepalis). Some might see parallels with nikab-wearing Muslim women being forced to unveil in France, or ISIS coercions of non-covered women to wearing veils. In either case, the significance is that inhabitants are obligated to change their dress habits for seemingly irrelevant reasons, this being a travesty of whatever level of freedom there heretofore existed and an intense aversion to the government which enforces such rules.

Settled in the early 1990s into 7 camps in Jhapa and Morang Districts, this eclectic, displaced mass of about 110,000 started to shrink after 2007 when resettlement

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<sup>5</sup> The first documented Nepali in Bhutan was a Newar craftsman engaged to build a memorial chorten, or stupa (Aris, 1979). Similar craftsmen had been commissioned by Tibetan King Srongtsen Gampo's Nepali wife Bhrikuti in the 7th century, to build the Potala and other temples. Settlement of Nepalis increased with British exigencies for road building and food production from the mid-19th century in Bhutan, Sikkim and what is now northern West Bengal.

programmes to about a dozen countries were implemented (UNHCR, 2015). The common language with the Nepalis near their camps made a palpable difference in communication and developing trust, despite some cultural dissimilarities with Nepal after living in Bhutan for several generations. In retrospect, this refugee population was dispersed to welcoming countries more quickly than most refugee groups elsewhere in the world because some had decided to integrate within Nepali society. In addition, there are three other reasons, as elucidated in my personal communication with Bhutanese, Nepalis and Pakistanis within their respective countries:

Relatively quick and adept preparatory organisation and subsequent camp management by the Government of Nepal, the UN and some International Non-Government Organizations (such as the Lutheran World Service) in partnership with competent local Non-Government Organizations, although the standards did differ from camp to camp.

Decent education levels, at the very least of the school age children, as schools had been established in all camps; ergo a good start by ensuring that once resettlement takes place, at least the new generation will more easily adapt.

An aura of exoticism, coming from Bhutan, an erstwhile peaceful and exotic Buddhist/Hindu land and to some, a mesmerising country, albeit sadly beclouded by its royalty's xenophobia, with violent repression and expulsion of its Nepali citizens.

In my observation and assessment, the last reason is the most critical, as there are certain traits, characteristics and personalities that western societies tend to more easily connect with and trust, and this facilitates decision-making in determining the preferred immigrant. In other words, there needs to be some symmetry between the policy environment, regulatory application, livelihood opportunities as well as the host country and its receiving communities' attitudes toward immigrants (Brun, 2001). Certain countries make it clear what type of immigrants they would prohibit or prefer; others, to at least present a liberal façade, do not single out particular cultures but might inherently have biases in selection. People from a relatively peaceful country or region with an even limited real or perceived affinity to the host culture may be preferred.

Success in receiving permission to resettle somewhere does not, however, preclude succumbing to severe adaptation problems.

*Many are unable to communicate with their host communities, plagued by worries about family back home, or unemployed. In addition to depression, risk factors for suicide include[d] not being the family's provider, feelings of limited social support, and having family conflict after resettlement.*  
(Preiss, 2013)

In other words, sustained instability, fears, and embarrassment have led to negative coping strategies.

Later on, I spent three years working in Peshawar, the capital of the Northwest Frontier Province (later renamed Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) in Pakistan. This exposed me to



Disrepair in Afghan IDP Camp near Peshawar 2010, author photo

governance and social service deficiencies (education, health, water) within an insurgent environment; to the effects of international influence and interference in a sovereign state (The New Yorker, 2016; Cheema, 2015); and with the oscillating societal levels of tolerance for approximately 5 million Pashtun and Hazara Afghan refugees in absolutely horrendous, crumbling maze camps. The latter were barren brown expanses of cramped, peeling mud walls with loose roofing, mud-engorged alleys on rainy days, with little relief from the heat of the summer months. During some Taliban defeats around 2002, about half the refugees returned to Afghanistan; but when the security situation worsened again, my personal observations and communication in field indicated that more families crossed over to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In 2016 the Pakistani government was trying to repatriate the remaining 3 million or so (see Danish, 2016; Ferrie, 2017; Ferrie et al, 2016; Jamal, 2016; Rashid, 2016). Yet once again the Taliban (and in some areas, ISIS) were experiencing local victories which, inevitably, fuel an ongoing ebb and flow of refugee mobilisation with the associated disruption of normal life. This diaspora has its internal tensions caused by uncertainty, instability, and incomprehension of how thousands born in the camps in Pakistan could undergo refoulement (i.e. forced return of a refugee to any place where their lives and safety would remain threatened) to a land many had never seen. The shortage of funds and services would mean scant welcome to a rapid influx of so many. According to the Human Rights Watch (2016), “Economic hardship in Pakistan, linked to loss of access to job markets due to a deteriorated freedom of movement, harassment, and intimidation, arbitrary arrest, extortions, and bribery” restrict health and education services. This, coupled with stress on its own severe displacement issues in Pakistani society means that almost 2 million people were relocated because of natural (floods and/or earthquakes) and anthropogenic causes (militancy, and many communities’ aversion to continuous hosting of migrants).

Thus the displaced population feel and know that they are on the verge of overstaying their welcome to the degree that even those circa 200,000 who had legally obtained Pakistani citizenship or Computerized National Identity Cards have been threatened, as recently as 2015, in having these documents abrogated (Riaz, 2015; Express Tribune 2015). As Kibreab (1999) noted, the attitudes of the host community are one of the key determinants of refugee relationships and the integration into the host communities.

Like Tibetan refugees in Nepal, a minority of successful Afghan entrepreneurs have flourishing shops; some try to integrate with local society, and many do; but the majority remains impoverished and in declining health. Social structures have been weakened, fear of rejection and ejection hang like a thick fog over the displaced, knowing that uncertainty shall remain the only constant for the foreseeable future.

### **Reflections from Canada, 2016-2020.**

My experience has progressively led me to increased understanding from various perspectives. I have come to believe that –much as one’s not being able to escape romantic or creative thinking about indigenous peoples without ever having even, at least, visited a reservation if not having actually stayed with the people<sup>6</sup>– only personal experience as a refugee or, at the very least, living amongst refugees, offers any chance for credible empathy. Empathy is not an abstract concept. Empathy is an accumulation of an intentional interdisciplinary understanding of the “wicked complexity,” the “metacontext,” if you will, of the social, political, educational, religious and cultural environment (along with other parameters) causing and accepting (or rejecting) refugees and migrants. People’s movement, especially compelled mass movement, inherently has so many facets, components and perspectives that single-discipline focused experts, be they bureaucrats, academics or NGO stalwarts, often cannot adequately articulate the status quo nor the appurtenant needs and response. Castels (2003) insightfully lists some ideal complementarities of relevant disciplines vis à vis refugees:

- *history, anthropology, geography, demography, political economy and economics in explaining the causes of forced migration and the dynamics of movement;*
- *political science and law in examining entry rules, migration policies, and institutional structures;*
- *psychology, cultural studies and anthropology in studying individual and group experiences of exile, identity, belonging and community formation;*
- *law, political science and social policy studies in analysing settlement and community*

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<sup>6</sup> During my work with First Nations communities in Canada, I heard sometimes acerbic comments and other times “friendly advice” about government consultants who flew in to a community and made sure to depart the same day because it was inconceivable to remain there overnight. My own anthropological instincts gave me confidence and desire to, indeed, always spend at least one night –more if feasible–in and with a community.

• *sociology – as the study of individual, society and the relationship between structures and group processes – is involved in research on all the above aspects of the migratory process.*<sup>7</sup>

Following the abhorrent treatment of migrants by Australia (BBC, 2016) and the recent wave of dangerous passages from Africa to and through Europe, it has been distressing to read and hear broad brush, stereotypical statements about pernicious characters, religious extremists, high security risks, economic leeches and so on.

And it has got me thinking.

Had we not managed to escape in December 1956:

Would these same xenophobic critics be spewing mea culpas for not having been able to help (now that it would be a moot issue)?

Would they be beating the drums against the Hungarian AVO's excesses or Soviet invaders' cruelty?

Would they shamelessly be exclaiming their anguish in not being able to have us saved and brought to their countries (now that they don't really have to)?

Had we indeed escaped but been unwelcomed in Austria, the country of first refuge; had we been forced back over the border or compelled to move on to another country, pressured out of desperation to crawl under barbed wires or packed into some ramshackle camp (for months or years):

*Would these same xenophobic critics understand the feeling of leaving everything and everyone behind?*

Could anyone in more comfortable, stable, peaceful democratic societies have any inkling as to the psychological scars left by having been compelled to change surnames by a previous intolerant regime? Or to feel it necessary to set a lit Christmas tree prominently in the window so that others would see and think that we adhered to the mainstream religion?

Could they empathise with what it may be like to escape with children who get fevers on the way and feel tired beyond words?

Would they comprehend how in a prolonged environment of fear, lack of privacy, uncertainty, impoverishment, reliance on others, evaporation of education, unscrupulous interveners and scammers, unknown destinations, sensing of being unwanted, sensing becoming a number rather than a person, inability to be with family, compromised health, prey to diverse gender and child-related exploitative

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<sup>7</sup>In the establishment in Indonesia of Mulawarman University's Centre for Social Forestry in 1997, I had worked with local host colleagues in ensuring that the severe community/extractives issues confronting society could be addressed holistically. Our solution lay not in simply having various specialists look at a particular problem and being able to say we had a "transdisciplinary team"; rather that all issues would be collectively analysed so that an "interdisciplinary team" could multiply its creativity and response alternatives. This effort is sustained to this day.

activities....could lead to desperate and perhaps inadvisable yet (perhaps) predictable decisions?

Could they truly – truly – envision the process for a previously peaceful person becoming agitated, inconsolable, criminal, unstable....even radicalised?

Had we, after landing in Canada, not been welcomed, not been made to feel like we were home, derided in the street, in school or in stores:

Would these same xenophobic critics have said “see, we told you so, these are antisocial people, they don’t blend, they just stay in their own ghettos”?

Would human rights and sundry experts mired in terminological beardedness have accused us of having used smugglers?

People must understand the antecedents of refugees’ discomfort, social distancing and increased isolation. My own escape was traumatic enough, but incomparable to the extreme physical risks and “on arrival” ghettoization of those fleeing in flimsy dinghies or walking for days in the heat and cataclysmic moonscape of an emaciated Syria. In my global involvements, I learned that people do, indeed, have similar needs, desires and ambitions; humour is in all cultures, as is love, friendship, goodwill to others, protection of children and the vulnerable, some levels of fate balanced with sincere effort, seeking practical education and, above all, trust. Certainly the process of accessing, achieving and dealing with these characteristics varies from culture to culture. As Mahmoud (2015) so correctly articulated,

*Historically, the dynamic of cultural expectations has always been reduced by both sides, the new settlers and the welcoming nations, to a few shallow cultural differences over relatively trivial aspects such as food habits and the exposure or concealment of women’s flesh. It is not. The cultural divide involves far deeper issues, ranging from the subtlety of body language and eye contact to more overt actions, such as engaging with the local community and developing a sense of belonging. (Also see Luxmoore, 2011; Bauer and Hein, 2016)*

As just one essential example, even within one’s own country, trust is earned from any combination of credentials (types and levels of qualifications); status (multigenerational family history in region, respect and recognition within community, position at work); familiarity (approachability); articulatory ability (how one expresses oneself, ease of communicating) and perceived commonalities (finding anything in common), to name some determinants; when interacting with people from other cultures, especially in an atmosphere of mutual apprehension, other decision-enabling elements may be required, such as: increased frequency of communication; strengthening personal connections within the expatriate and host communities; proactive application of processes for mutual understanding (Somlai, 2015).

## **Dilemmas, intuitions, confusions. April 2018.**

My birthplace, one of the most culturally sophisticated countries in Europe, had been invaded. When at a breaking point, the country's leader made an emotional plea to the free world, as did the Union of Hungarian Writers (Radio Free Kossuth b., 1956) which was repeated over the next three hours (see below) until the Soviets cannonaded or otherwise destroyed the radio stations.

The Prime Minister implored:

*Civilized people of the world, listen and come to our aid, not with declarations, but with force, with soldiers and arms. Do not forget that there is no stopping the wild onslaught of Bolshevism. Your turn will also come, once we perish. Save our souls! save our souls! Peoples of Europe, whom we helped for centuries to withstand the barbaric attacks from Asia, listen to the tolling of Hungarian bells warning against disaster. Civilized peoples of the world, we implore you to help us in the name of justice, of freedom, of the binding moral principle of active solidarity. Our ship is sinking. Light is failing, the shadows grow darker every hour over the soil of Hungary. Listen to the cry, civilized peoples of the world, and act; extend to us your fraternal hand. "SOS, SOS -may God be with you."*

The Union of Hungarian Writers complemented:

*To every writer in the world, to all scientists, to all writers' federations, to all science academies and associations, to the intelligentsia of the world! We ask all of you for help and support; there is but little time! You know the facts, there is no need to give you a special report! Help Hungary! Help the Hungarian writers, scientists, workers, peasants, and our intelligentsia! ...Help! Help! Help!*

Aside from the formality of some remonstrations, there was silence from the world, and it took from then until 1989 to finally break out of the Soviet mould.

At the same time, Canada's surprising response resulted in over 37,000 Hungarians resettled in Canada. Demonstrably successful and beneficial to the country's growing economy and social development (see Hungarian Presence, n.d.), a more confident Canada thereafter proactively engaged in later resettlement efforts which saw the welcoming and resettling of displaced people from Europe, Africa and Asia between 1968 and 2000 (Molloy, 2006). In other words, Canada—amongst others—learned positively from that experience and was progressively making up for its travesty of earlier rejections of legitimate refugees in 1914 (SFU, 2011) and 1938 (Brief History, n.d.). Most recently, the admittance of over 30,000 Syrians to date seems to continue Canada's cautious trust in its process. With proper verification processes and the accompanying orientations and briefings, complemented by exposure of Canadians to Syrian (and other) cultures, many more from other countries could—and should—be admitted.

Now, in relation to the contemporary predominantly Muslim refugees and migrants entering and trying to enter Europe and North America, the temptation is to draw parallels between and amongst previous—and seemingly similar—mass displacements. However, a major difference is attributable to the larger number for the forcibly displaced, the speed at which the fleeing masses are reaching some safe lands, all concatenated with a confusing response system.

Hungary has unenviably portrayed itself as perhaps the least-welcoming country in the E.U. for refugees. As the country's Prime Minister frankly explained:

*Everything which is now taking place before our eyes threatens to have explosive consequences for the whole of Europe. We shouldn't forget that the people who are coming here grew up in a different religion and represent a completely different culture.<sup>8</sup> Most are not Christian, but Muslim ... That is an important question, because Europe and European culture have Christian roots. (Aljazeera, 2016)*

Neighbouring Slovakia has evinced similar concerns:

*You have to understand....that there are countries which have been open to other cultures for centuries, and there are countries for which this is a new experience. This [refugee intake] cannot be ordered overnight. It has to be a process. You have to explain it to people. They have to get used to it. People are afraid of what they don't know. Our people have not been exposed to Muslims and they are frightened. It's a new phenomenon for them (...). Hundreds of Muslims mean nothing in Belgium or London ....but it does mean something in Slovakia. (DW, 2016)*

Historicity of Europe's roots aside, the two leaders do have valid points in that these and a few other countries have had largely homogenous populations except for the Mongol and Ottoman incursions in the 13th, 15th and 16th centuries (Tucker, 2009; BBC, 2012). And it is true that in modern times they have relatively minimal experience with significantly different cultures; while census data shows there are 30 or more minorities, most of them are from neighbouring countries. These are illustrative for all the bordering countries. What is not disaggregated from the census (to bring the diverse origins of inhabitants to 30+) is the category "Other", which includes people of origin from previously Soviet or other communist states such as Vietnam, Laos etc. and a few modern day refugees from countries like Syria. (Kovács, 2011; Kapitány, 2015).

When the Soviet system was still operating, there were students and workers from some Asian communist countries, such as Vietnam, with some having settled permanently in Hungary and Slovakia. Indeed, Islam and other minority Christian religions were not officially recognized in the Hungarian Constitution until 2012,(ANN, 2012) and most practitioners, as I am personally informed, are white, ethnic Hungarians. With

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<sup>8</sup> Albeit Hungarians, too, have some Central Asian and Central European admixture

the present rightist government in Hungary, even white, ethnic Hungarians who have adopted Islam face prejudice (Bauer, *ibid*).

Hungary and its plea in 1956 are in contrast to its stance on immigration today, seemingly showing contradictory perceptions of “active solidarity” (Radio Free Kossuth b., *ibid*). In fact, the different responses do point to the fact that would the world have cooperatively and effectively confronted the Soviets and halted the incursion, there may not have been any sizeable displacement of Hungarians; by extrapolation, had the world cooperatively and effectively confronted Syria and been able to stop the civil war, there may not have been the millions displaced today.<sup>9</sup> Fewer displaced are much more manageable than millions (Binnendijk and Johnson, 2004; Brahm, 2006). And, at any time, decisions may be thought of as averse, but which are in fact beneficial for a nation’s strategic and political welfare.

Meanwhile, in long-time multicultural countries such as Canada, USA and Australia, indigenous lands had been gradually occupied by Europeans who were induced to emigrate to relieve population pressures on the continent “back home;” to develop land, trade and commerce; to proselytise; and to keep the emerging newcomers safe. As some countries were formally established by a combination of refugees, economic migrants and adventurers, the newly evolving nationalism of each country supported stricter immigration as an expressed means of perceived cultural preservation. But we—especially citizens from the above mentioned countries—should not forget our own entry to these lands; our own process of establishing communities, laws and new nationalism; and, above all, our often inconvenient relationship with those upon whose lands we intruded (Sylvester, 2016).

Fundamentally then, present immigration issues have assumed a wicked complexity owing to greater numbers of refugees than ever before within a very short time span. Amongst these, thousands fleeing by boat drowned, ratcheting up the pressure for countries and agencies to act faster and more effectively; but the stress on governments has made the response even more difficult. The situation is further compounded by frequent terrorism, habitually attributed to Islamic adherents. The states, however, did not have the ability to separate true believers (in whatever religion) from ersatz adherents who are only symbolically allied to their faith and who distortedly use the umbrage of the faith as rationale for deleterious ends. Additionally, many refugees intend to or have been counseled to settle in countries not accustomed to receiving large numbers of Muslims (e.g. Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, Baltic countries). As for the destination countries, governments facing internal exigencies (high unemployment, large debt burden, fear of welfare and pension benefit cuts, xenophobia) may severely limit political leeway for refugees. This leads to some countries rationalising limits or impediments to easy admittance: high levels of

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<sup>9</sup> I say “may not” and this is, of course, arguable. “While multilateral missions complicate coordination and bureaucratic management, they also spread risk across different participants and appear to be more successful (Binnendijk, H). At the same time, military intervention seems just as likely to invigorate or generate new insurgencies as to bring them to an end.”

academic or professional experience (Japan); cash incentives (Denmark); anti-immigrant parties gaining popularity, thus pushing other parties to inch toward the right (Sweden); security bonds for students or workers (United Kingdom) (National Geographic, 2013).

## Conclusion

A few life lessons from my experience with refugees, multicultural communities, slums and social services in Europe, Asia and the Americas are offered. It would be prudent to state that my statements do not claim to comprise all possible improvements to the current imbroglio; and that while some might point out that certain suggestions are not new, I repeat or paraphrase them as they have yet to be systematically implemented anywhere. Hence, these conclusions remain “inconclusive.”

1. Usable land availability and suitability must be taken into account in decision-making. It is one thing for a country to feel uncomfortable taking in refugees in numbers highly disproportionate to its population, especially as compared to other similar countries; but it demands quite another rationale if, population aside, there is much unused land in a particular country that refugees would hardly make a dent.<sup>10</sup> In rapidly aging populations (such as in Japan, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation and the United Kingdom), “replacement migration” is a key solution to counteract the otherwise predictable downward trend of production linking with diminished taxes, resulting social service vulnerabilities, and excuses seem out of touch with reality (Hungarian Free Press 2017; Reuters, 2018). This highlights a paradox for Hungary which, while experiencing outmigration of over 30% of skilled and linguistically adept workers, would benefit from a higher birthrate or acceptance of more refugees and immigrants (Hungarian Free Press, *ibid*). With exponential population growth and limited land, we cannot remain selfish to the extent of excluding demonstrably needy refugees or migrants from available land in sparsely populated countries. We need to recall, from Canadian modern history, that many of our own immigrants arrived as settlers to exploit land for farming and ranching. In this century, there naturally are innumerable work opportunities not only in rural farming and ranching (perhaps to seek decorporatization of farmlands), but in urban areas as well; however, many immigrants do come from farming backgrounds and could be urged to settle in smaller cities and towns, depending on family composition, skills, proximity of health facilities, upgrading institutions and other learning centres.
2. Referring to history, to understand when and how countries assisted other nations during times of upheaval, famine, devastating calamity and militarily contested governments. Illustrative of such collaboration is captured in the insightful re-enactment of Japanese-Turkish reciprocation separated by almost a century (Tanaka, 2015). After all, it would not make sense to bring in people who have

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<sup>10</sup>This principle is obviously complicated by rights of Indigenous peoples in settler states. And this principle would have to be qualified to accommodate those particularities in such a state.

been struggling to live in their home countries and escape to a receiving new homeland wherein similar struggles would be perpetuated because of living conditions or social conflicts. By reviewing and understanding the conditions that underscore particular attitudes, concepts and behaviours in certain cultures, one could then see that in a more beneficent social environment—as afforded by a place of refuge—people can change and adapt. Simple “bookish” or touristic familiarity with particular cultures cannot suffice for distilling deep knowledge and understanding of a very different culture.

3. Establish practical parameters for coming to a country as well as providing displaced people with aid. Despite reams of reports, strategies, declarations and debates, there remain daunting and aggravating inconsistencies in the application of espoused responses and a seemingly permanent roadblock in establishing sufficient trust among potential aid providers as well as in those very countries or among the very peoples requesting aid. This requires a common understanding in, what late Prime Minister Imre Nagy, in his appeal to the world on the dawn of Hungary’s collapse under the illegal Soviet occupation, termed as a “binding moral principle of active solidarity.” (Radio Free Kossuth b., *ibid*; Tanaka, *ibid*). The *modus operandi* for implementing such aspirations need be worked out beforehand.
4. Entrench first-country-of-refuge comprehensive settlement services, including identity verification; skill, education and health assessments; documentation and recommendations or decisions for onward country of settlement. The entangled granularity of being able to prove one’s claims in the absence of papers, and of the validity of papers that are available, adds considerably to the complexity of decision-making. While there is a reasonable Canadian process in place, (Canadian Security Intelligence Service, 2016; Lutheran, 2015; UNICEF, 2006), in conflict regions there are serious limits from both bureaucratic as well as humanitarian aspects to get precise, validated information. National and international agencies must ensure synchronicity in their discrete processes and regulations.
5. Regardless of the *in loco* process for refugee verification, the first-country-of-refuge could organise welcoming, well-organised, and simple receptions to buoy the spirit and rekindle faith in strangers. However, neighbouring countries to the areas of conflict must not be encumbered, by default, as long term hosts for the displaced.
6. Once a particular country of destination is approved, that country must provide a focused pre-departure orientation covering socio-cultural expectations, especially related to religion, dress, language; interaction with government officials (e.g. police, bureaucrats); domestic living conditions and regulations regarding larger and extended families; work opportunities and expectations; acceptability of foreign-earned credentials and options for retraining or upgrading for contemporary needs; suggested match of backgrounds to types of host communities (e.g. rural, urban); general standards of morality; optimizing integration; and what to expect on arrival. This is an absolutely essential programme for people who come from

different cultures. Whether we admit it or not, all peaceful, modern and ostensibly exemplary societies have been at times besmirched by xenophobic and prejudiced actions toward refugees. I argue that the fear of admitting certain groups of applicants is predicated by insufficient or incorrect knowledge of those groups and their customs, beliefs and habits, concatenated with a dearth of appurtenant orientation and briefing programmes both in and outside the country. The obverse of this, naturally, is that it behoves refugees to also seek and/or accept, if proffered, orientation about their destination so as to enable their decision-making prior to departure. It is patently unfair to both sides to have refugees arrive in a country only to realise that there are restrictions on certain clothing or religious garb, or that some of their own socio-cultural traditions are illegal and seriously punishable. If no opportunity had presented itself earlier, then this would be the stage at which emphasis should be put on the host country's expectation of proactive efforts by incoming refugees to integrate in their new society so as to avoid ghettoisation, social exclusion and allied inevitable problems.

7. The receiving country must arrange on-arrival briefings to supplement the pre-departure orientations and reviewing the recommended steps for progressive integration; this process may be contracted to qualified local, trained social assistance groups.
8. Never think displacement cannot happen to you and your community! Cultured and supposedly civilized people can turn against one another when what one believes metamorphoses into how things must be (Frostrup, 2016). I have seen this first hand in Hungary, Canada, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, North Korea, Nicaragua, Slovakia and elsewhere.
9. Trust in basic human goodness. Most people, especially families with young children, would not risk their lives in escaping were it not that worse fate might befall them by staying in their ravaged communities; these escapees cannot be assumed to be terrorists or miscreants. Trust and gradual integration in a new society evolves from days to years; and it has to progress under mutual respect with sincere effort by both sides to understand one another, bearing in mind the frequently eventual benefit to both hosts and newcomers.

The present refugee crisis is at a hypercritical level which, by its unprecedented complexity has presented politically charged decision-making contributing, in turn, to ineffective and often irrational management. We must collectively take responsibility for having been incapable of mitigating if not preventing, influencing if not interceding, alleviating if not holistically and effectively halting the crises which have caused so many displaced within the recent past. In my mind it is not that we cannot plan for the eventualities of such catastrophic events and create scenarios of probabilities and concatenated responses: what bothers me the most is that we have not learned sufficiently from the past to effectively intercede in emerging atrocities before they exponentially magnify. We have forgotten or disregarded the immense atrocities and

trauma of all continents and have become complacent in thinking that we have the knowledge and skills to avoid future human-caused calamities. To wit: I received the report “Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Stephen O’Brien – Statement to the Security Council on Syria, New York, 21 November 2016”, in which was stated “...*shame on us all for not acting to stop the annihilation..... All the facts and reports I gave last month have, not one of them, been changed, qualified, denied or proven wrong, by any one of you or anyone beyond this room.*”

This attitude, in combination with increasing population, new forms of media and warfare (internet), and an increase in seemingly intractable conflicts creates the wicked complexity of today. Ironically, it seems to take a crippling pandemic to realize—temporarily perhaps?— the transformation of immigrants considered different and unskilled into essential and skilled contributors to society.

Each of these aspects requires a study of its own by those involved or planning to become involved in refugee related services; and the sundry parts must be intelligently woven into a complex whole for each catastrophe that creates refugees. Moreover, the metacontext of refugees and migrants, in view of the current and probable future similar circumstances, is indeed so complex that the hysteresis of such massive movements will be known only in many years hence, perhaps to our next generation which will not have the empathy we now have with the displaced populations from our parents’ as well as our own generation still languishing in camps.



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