

English Translation

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The Hungarian Refugee Camp at Korneuburg, Austria, from 1956 to 1959

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Hungarian Crisis of 1956 -- a personal experience

For me, the year 1956 was a year that set a course in my life. On October 15, 1956, I volunteered to move into the Artillery School at Baden, near Vienna, with the first soldiers of the "2nd [Austrian] Republic".

For years, we youngsters always held the notion "Austria is not free" in our minds. Since May 15, 1955, we regained our citizenship in our sovereign nation again. Our impression of the Soviet occupying forces, and the behavior of many of their soldiers, made us young men eager to defend our country, doing everything needed to prevent "*this* from ever happening again in our country". "*This*" was referring to the horrors of post-war and the early years thereafter, when foreign soldiers exerted their power and brutality. Also, imposing their continuing, overbearing psychological propaganda convinced us the Soviets were compulsively evil, distorting and prejudicing our view of the world.

The first days of habituation at the Bundesheer (Federal Army) were not very exciting though. Maybe, it was the insecurity of many war veterans now being officers and sergeants, about how to treat army soldiers in a *democratic* system, that prevented us from suffering from the atrocities and harsh treatment during the occupation by the Germans. Our equipment wasn't bad – apart from having only light arms, most of our equipment actually was state-of-the-art.

Typically during that time, we were not very well informed, especially not about what was happening abroad, not even with our neighboring countries. Reading daily newspapers was not yet common. We were mainly relying on radio for information. Regular TV broadcasts were only available since January 1, 1957 (see also Note 1). For us, radio news were only available at the office of our battery commandant, hence we were living relatively carefree day in, day out.

One day, it might have been Oct 24, 1956, a rumor spread in our barracks, that there was a outbreak of a revolution in Hungary: the Hungarians would try to drive the Soviets out of the country. We all thought of it to be very positive news, since we felt very close with Hungary, as we didn't like the Soviets (see above). Unfortunately, the tide turned pretty quickly, and the news about the invasion of Soviet troops fighting against the Hungarians spread even quicker – and all of a sudden, we felt being needed, but at that point in time, we had virtually no military training yet.

On Oct 26, [1956,] the Federal Government of Austria decided to send federal army troops to the border. The order was given in anticipation of a large number of refugees: "Fire should only be opened in case of *armed* individuals or troops crossing the border refusing to obey the call to

return or to lay down their arms." (see also Note 2) – at that time, we were willing to fight against the superior enemy.

Various rumors abounded, one of the most absurd was: "If the Soviets would attack us, the Americans would rush to our aid within hours". Today, we know, that the Americans never intended to interfere. Another rumor, said to be broadcasted by Radio Free Europe to the Hungarian fighter heroes in Budapest: "Withstand, we will come", was never seriously supported – but that only became known in today's historical research. There were lots of rumors.

We were lying in position, ready to fire – being threatened, we trained for war. No question, if we have gotten engaged in the conflict, it would have been an enormous massacre. After several days, the tension relaxed a bit for us. We returned to Baden, but I was sent further to the Traiskirchen refugee camp, to join the guard. Our sympathy for Hungary was enormous. We even donated a share of our low daily stipend, which was 5 Austrian Schillings (S 5.-) at that time – the price of 10 cigarettes "Austria 3" (S 1.80) and a mug of beer (S 3.20). Unfortunately, there were also some troublemakers in the refugee camp. May it be the intense psychological tension, or may it be agitators – I can't tell any more after all that time. Then, I was definitely very angry about it, and I began to differentiate between refugees.

In mid December, I was able to go home for the first time, and I also spent Christmas at home. By that time, Hungarian refugees were already moved into the *Albrechtskaserne* [barracks], about which I collected quite a large, yet still incomplete set of data during the last few months. The reason for the survey being incomplete was that only at the beginning, the UN collected all data about the refugees, but later, when the wave of refugees slowed down due to the mining of the Iron Curtain, no extensive reports were needed any more. The tragedy of the Hungarian refugees, formerly watched by the world, became just an Austrian-Hungarian border affair.

The "Ungarnlager" (Hungarian Camp) Buildings

The Hungarian refugee camp "Ungarnlager" was located in the following 4 buildings that were left over from the 2nd World War: The Army Barracks "Feldmarschall Erzherzog Albrecht Kaserne" (3) and the "Kammergebäude" (4) at the corner of "Liebleitner Ring" road and "Chimanigasse" lane, which was erected by the German "Wehrmacht" in 1939/40. Today, the "Kammergebäude" is used by a hostel and an adult education institute. The main building of the "Albrechtskaserne", located at the Stockerauerstraße, was destroyed in 1945. The "Albrechtsgasse" lane, where the western ranks building was, was closed and only got re-opened after 1959. (4) After the withdrawal of the Russian troops, the free area west of the "Albrechtsgasse" was given out for circuses, and was also used to park the tanker trucks of the Molzer company.

The western and the eastern ranks buildings were each sized for 3 companies of the Railroad- and Telegraph-Regiment, i.e. for about 350-400 troops per building. The school building at the "Chimanigasse" lane was a bit smaller, and in between the two ranks buildings was also the smaller former sergeants' home with prison cells (3). As far as we can reconstruct it, the kitchen was in the "Kammergebäude". During the occupation by the soviets, this building had a little "loading ramp", at approx. the 4th set of windows, seen from the "Chimanigasse". From today's

point of view, it is astonishing, that the basement was considered the "ground floor", hence the building had 2 (!) upper floors.

The original was erected following a decision by the municipal council of the town of Korneuburg from June 18, 1889, and rented out to the army for 40 years. Hence, these barracks were always property of the town of Korneuburg (3). The "Kammergebäude" building was added later by the German Wehrmacht, on their own expenses and without considering any municipal property rights. Only on June 14, 1940, a lease contract between the town and the Reich's Treasury acknowledged the town's ownership of the "Kammergebäude" building. After WW II, this issue was still disputed between the municipality and the state's finance ministry. A decision in 1956 by a hearing at the Federal Building Administration Two (BGV II) in favor of Korneuburg was only put into effect little by little over time (4).

Despite the now clear legal position, an amount of 1.5m Shillings was granted in 1957 for the renovation of the "Albrechtskaserne" barracks, then being declared as "Federal Military Property" (8).

The Development of the Refugee Camp at Korneuburg

By the end of summer 1955, the Soviet occupying forces left the barracks at Korneuburg. I cannot remember any reconstruction or clean up actions at the "Albrechtskaserne" area, although I didn't live far from it, and I passed it at least twice a day.

By the time, the Hungarian refugees rushed in, the Federal Department of the Interior must have acted lightning fast, because the "Russian" conditions at the barracks turned into a fairly acceptable camp within less than 2 months. no data could be found about the funds spent, nor the delivery of beds or other furnishings. A realistic guess is, that the camp has been brought up to a certain standard following a request by the Federal Government, without any foreign financial or material help yet. On December 19, 1956, the camp was first occupied with 966 refugees. On December 24, 1956, there were 536 people, including 79 children. The departure of 430 persons around Dec 19 is not in the records (5).

Already on December 17, 1956, the "Stockerau" camp was occupied by 1634 refugees, including 230 children. Furthermore, 50 to 60 people were accommodated in some private homes (no details available), approx. 50 at the "Stiedl" Inn, and 10-20 at the "Sierndorf" castle. (The numbers are approximate according to the available records) (5). More accurate statistics about the camp were only started on Dec 28, 1956, and were kept up for the Korneuburg camp until May 05, 1957 (see below).

There is no proof for the rumor, that the Korneuburg camp could only be operated with help from Sweden. This shall not belittle their support, as they have provided help generously. The Netherlands were also very helpful, e.g. they built the "Queen Juliana" High School for Hungarian refugees on "Mount Isels" in Carinthia. However, this old building shall now be demolished in 2001.

Another non-provable rumor is, that one or more camps would have been reserved for specific religious groups. This prejudice might be due to a mix up in time: The Korneuburg camp started off as a camp basically for Hungarian refugees, with about 121 Hungarians on February 9, 1959,

which emigrated or were moved to other camps until the end of March. Later, the camp was rented out to the "Jewish Agency for Israel", for Romanian Jews, who were supposed to emigrate to Israel. But, this lease agreement was made on Oct 24, 1960, for the time between March 1st 1960 to the end of 1962. According to a note, Mr Rauchbüchel told the Department of the Interior about the decision of the municipal council about the renewal of the lease contract until Dec. 31, 1965. The missing year (Mar 1, 1959 until Feb 28, 1960) was most likely used for a renovation, stimulated by the Federal Defense Department (6).

The capacity of the Korneuburg camp was assumed to be 700 people by mid March 1957 (5). In 1959, this estimate was increased to a capacity of 1000 people (6), apparently due to intentions to renovate. From the very beginning, there seems to have been a very effective occupational program in place for the refugees, because there are no records about severe conflicts among the refugees. In contrast to the "Stockerau" camp, where several acts of violence both among the refugees, but also towards the local population were documented. This might have been due to the larger number of refugees at Stockerau.

Number of Refugees at the Korneuburg Camp
between Dec 28, 1956, and May 5, 1957 (5)

Date (dd.mm.yy)	Admissions	Departures	Camp Inhabitants	Children included	Hungarians in N-Austria
28.12.56			146		10926
29.12.56		134	12		12309
31.12.56	35		47		12160
01.01.57		41	6		11964
02.01.57			6		11629
03.01.57	107	6	107	29	12771
04.01.57	129		236	68	12738
05.01.57	39		275	75	12631
06.01.57		22	253	75	12687
07.01.57			253	75	12626
08.01.57	57		310	89	11856
09.01.57			310	89	13022
10.01.57			310	89	12672
11.01.57	94	1	403	92	12233

Date (dd.mm.yy)	Admissions	Departures	Camp Inhabitants	Children included	Hungarians in N-Austria
14.01.57			403	92	11487
15.01.57	2	4	401	91	11325
17.01.57		401	0		
19.01.57	16		16	4	11858
20.01.57	70		86	25	12417
21.01.57	54		140	40	12996
22.01.57	38		178	46	12243
23.01.57	82		260	71	
24.01.57	17		277	74	12299
25.01.57	32		309	78	12603
27.01.57	16		325	83	12373
28.01.57	20		345	88	11898
29.01.57	25		370	89	12240
30.01.57	15	9	376	89	12258
01.02.57	11	2	385	90	12233
02.02.57		4	381	90	12248
03.02.57	4		385	91	12315
04.02.57	25		410	98	12305
05.02.57	24	10	424	102	12231
06.02.57	20		444	108	11844
07.02.57	21		465	109	11694
08.02.57	14	4	475	117	11794
09.02.57		3	472	117	12025
11.02.57	12		484	119	12307
12.02.57		3	481	118	11945

Date (dd.mm.yy)	Admissions	Departures	Camp Inhabitants	Children included	Hungarians in N-Austria
13.02.57		7	474	115	11506
14.02.57	12	20	466	114	11375
15.02.57	12	3	475	117	11491
18.02.57	10	13	472	118	10948
19.02.57	1		473	118	10956
20.02.57	8		481	119	10326
21.02.57	11	1	491	121	10165
22.02.57	16		507	125	10581
23.02.57	2		509	126	10686
24.02.57	2	2	509	126	10288
25.02.57	20	3	526	132	10584
26.02.57	6	6	526	131	10288
27.02.57	2		528	131	10482
28.02.57	8	9	527	132	10663
01.03.57	25		552	138	10725
03.03.57	5	4	553	139	10357
04.03.57	6	6	553	137	10509
05.03.57	11	9	555	138	10504
06.03.57		1	554	138	10785
07.03.57	27	1	580	144	10723
08.03.57	30		610	154	11021
09.03.57	1	15	596	150	10964
11.03.57	21	2	615	153	10940
12.03.57	8	4	619	155	10650
13.03.57	3	27	595	148	10697

Date (dd.mm.yy)	Admissions	Departures	Camp Inhabitants	Children included	Hungarians in N-Austria
14.03.57	10		605	151	10894
15.03.57	20		625	156	10933
16.03.57		5	620	156	10970
17.03.57		1	619	156	10611
18.03.57	52	4	667	168	10571
19.03.57	11	36	642	157	10440
20.03.57	17	1	658	163	10268
21.03.57	20	2	676	168	10150
22.03.57	27	10	693	176	9918
24.03.57		3	690	176	9974
25.03.57		11	679	174	9777
27.03.57	25	4	700	183	9840
28.03.57		3	697	182	9773
31.03.57		2	695	182	9557
01.04.57		9	686	179	9259
02.04.57		12	674	176	9158
03.04.57	3	3	674	176	9129
04.04.57	4	2	676	177	9064
05.04.57	4	5	675	177	8852
08.04.57	11	1	685	181	8804
09.04.57	6	8	683	180	8677
10.04.57		10	673	178	7823
11.04.57	1	9	665	175	7633
12.04.57	7		672	178	7798
13.04.57		7	665	176	7859

Date (dd.mm.yy)	Admissions	Departures	Camp Inhabitants	Children included	Hungarians in N-Austria
15.04.57	3	3	665	177	7884
16.04.57	5	3	667	177	7406
17.04.57		1	666	177	7387
18.04.57	10	5	671	178	7058
19.04.57	4	4	671	180	7191
22.04.57		15	656	175	7079
25.04.57	5	8	653	173	6950
26.04.57	11	11	653	174	7045
27.04.57			653	174	6929
28.04.57		3	650	174	6951
29.04.57	7		657	177	6890
30.04.57	19		676	183	6942
02.05.57	10	5	681	185	6888
03.05.57	1	6	676	184	
05.05.57		6	670	181	6788

Up to that date [(the last date in the table above)] official records were available. On July 31, 1957, 534 refugees were registered at the Korneuburg Camp. On Sept 30, and November 30, 1957, 551 people were registered (7). Overall, about 2,500 to 3,000 people might have gone through that camp – it was a small refugee camp.

Additional Notes to the above Table of Records

On January 19, 1957, the Republic of Austria conducted a "Socio-Statistical Survey", File No. 200571-10 UH/1957. The significant increase of admissions to the Korneuburg Camp beginning January 20, 1957, was likely to be the effect of the announcement by the catholic relief organization "Caritas" to drop paying accommodation for refugees in hotels and Inns, which actually became effective February 16, 1957. In February, the private accommodations were also terminated, and the affected refugees were brought to various camps. (5)

Most likely, Mr. Johann Hornek, as a contractor for the government, was acting as the Head of the camp, and Mr. Josef Ohlschnögger (also a contractor) was responsible for the Structure and Equipment. By April 2nd, 1959, both men were recommended by the Department of the Interior to the „Jewish Agency" as very experienced employees in the administration, and employed by the „Jewish Agency". (9)

As mentioned above, "occupational therapy" had a high priority at Korneuburg from the very beginning, in order to avoid any "Camp Tantrum", otherwise very common at camps of that time. Hence, between February 17 and March 09, 1957, the following items were delivered:

- . 8 Table Tennis Rackets
- . 2 Nets
- . 72 Balls
- . 2 Domino Games
- . 2 Board Games „nine men's morris"

Between March 10 and 31, 1957,

- . 5 Chess Games and 10 Hungarian-English Language Class Books

were delivered (5).

From today's point of view, these quantities may appear ridiculously low, but at that time anything was so much more valuable. Also, it is important to know, that these official numbers only record the Federal help, but not the many private donations.

Time became Tougher

Between Oct 23, 1956 and Sept 13, 1957, a total of 171,369 Hungarian refugees came to Austria, of which 5,343 went back to Hungary, despite they had to expect problems there (10). In order to persuade many Hungarians to return to their country, Austria established the Hungarian "Re-Patriation Commission", which discontinued their activities already on April 30, 1957. (11)

From March 22 to 25, 1957, a UN commission visited Austria. Following the pressure from the USSR at that time, this commission was not appreciated by the Austrian Government, and any contact was limited to minimum protocol. (7)

In the meantime, Hungary's new regime renewed the so called Technical Frontier Protection, i.e. the barbwire and the mine fields along the "Iron Curtain". The political propaganda was intensified enormously – during my research in archives, I found a large number of files about "fabricated" or fake incidents at the border, and about the Communists accusing the Red Cross to allegedly smuggling arms. These reports of communist propaganda alone could fill a heavy book. The Hungarian Communists even protested against violations of their air space by Austrian Fighter aircraft, that the Austrian Air Force did not yet have at that time. Publishing lies to make their own interests and goals look better appears to be a "Right" of the super powers.

Unfortunately, it is a pity, that the communist system feared any slight touch of freedom so much, that the good old relationship between two neighboring countries got interrupted after centuries.

The End of the Hungarian Refugee Camp "Ungarnlager" in Korneuburg (6)

On February 6, 1959, the Federal Department of the Interior rejected the joint accommodation of Hungarian and Romanian refugees in the "Albrechtskaserne" barracks, and decided: "As soon as the Hungarian refugees have left the camp, the Town of Korneuburg as the owner of the camp will regain full control again".

On February 19, 1959, the mayor of Korneuburg, Franz Guggenberger, informed the Head of Section II of the Federal Department of the Interior, that the Austrian Army has been negotiating the use of the Korneuburg camp for military purposes since quite a while ago, and that there have been several inspections under the direction of General Waldmüller for that reason. The Federal Army planned:

- Starting April 1st, a company of pioneers should be transferred from Klosterneuburg to Korneuburg, since the Klosterneuburg barracks would be needed for new recruits.
- The Austrian Army also needed all other buildings and facilities of the "Albrechtskaserne" barracks at Korneuburg.
- Plans were ready for the conversion.
- The renovation should start as soon and as fast as possible.

However, the mayor was also negotiating with the "Palestine Agency" (the Jewish Agency for Israel) about leasing out the Korneuburg camp as a transit camp for Romanian Emigrants.

On February 24, 1959, the Federal Ministry of Defense announced, that they would be definitely interested in using the Korneuburg barracks for their purposes, but that their budget would not allow it yet in the year 1959.

On February 25, 1959, the Federal Ministry of the Interior agreed with the mayor, after consulting the Chancellor's Office, to negotiate with the Jewish Agency for Israel. Thus, after two years and three months, the Hungarian refugee camp became a camp for Romanian refugees.

At that time, the camp still had the following inventory in good condition (inventory taken in April 1959, [published in] BMI ZI. 201311 - 10 UN/59 dated May 4, 1959):

- 220 Beds
- 270 Matresses
- 25 Wooden Room Tables (large)
- 20 Wooden Room Tables (small)
- 10 Chairs
- 54 Benches
- 204 Stools

30 years later, during business travel in the "Eastern bloc" countries, I was witnessing the East Germans climbing over the walls into the West German Embassy [in Budapest]. On the evening before Hungary opened the border to Austria, a couple asked me in Mosonmagyaróvár language for the way to Austria. I was an eye-witness of the big Demonstration on the Wenzelsplatz square in Prague, where Vaclav Havel spoke to the people, and Karel Gott sang a patriotic song. On the day when the communist government in Prague resigned under the pressure of the people,

I was on my way to Poland, and I saw the happiness of the people in former Czechoslovakia. And I was the first Austrian citizen, who was allowed to enter Czechoslovakia, coming from Hungary.

Each and every time I thought, that "the Hungarians in the Korneuburg camp have saved themselves from 30 years of trouble and worries".

Sources:

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