

Connaught Barracks Welcomes Hungarian Refugees

Barry O'Brien – Dover Tales

I was recently lucky to have had the opportunity of an informal catch up with 'Mr Dover,' Terry Sutton MBE, and, ironically, soon after, tidying away Dover Society newsletters, found an article Terry had written outlining how the current crisis in Ukraine, following the Russian invasion, brought back memories of events in 1956 when Hungarian refugees were welcomed and cared for in Dover, following the Hungarian Uprising.

Although non-communists had won the 1945 election in Hungary, by 1948 the AVH, (Államvédelmi Hatóság or State Protection Authority), had the country within their control and had begun eliminating the Party's political opponents.

The Hungarian leader, Mátyás Rákosi, was considered a hard-line communist and was fully in league with Moscow. The AVH created a climate of fear, effectively curtailing the freedom of speech and arresting anyone who spoke out against communism. Even something as simple as listening to western music could, potentially, lead to arrest.



Stalin's man in Hungary Matyas Rakosi

The Hungarian economy was under pressure supporting, as it did, the many Soviet troops and officials stationed in the country, creating economic hardship for ordinary people, while the Russian language was imposed. Hungarian street signs were replaced with those in Russian, which was also being taught in Hungarian schools.

On 25th February 1956, Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, denounced many of his predecessor Joseph Stalin's crimes and human rights abuses and outlined his proposed policy to be less hard-line than Stalin and to use diplomacy, not force, in his dealings with other governments; all of which encouraged those in the Eastern Bloc to imagine that greater freedoms might be achievable.

Within months the Hungarian people had begun to protest against Rákosi's regime, leading to his being replaced, in July 1956, by one of his close associates Erno Gerő, who, having been involved in party expulsions, proved no more popular than Rákosi.

On 23rd October 1956, students marched through Budapest, intending to present a petition to the government. As the numbers taking part in the procession grew, Gerő delivered a harsh speech that greatly angered the demonstrators causing police to, eventually, open fire. This proved to be the start of the Hungarian Revolution.

As the uprising spread the central committee agreed that Janos Kadar should be made party leader and Imre Nagy made prime minister.

Nagy's proposed reforms included free elections, an impartial legal system, the total withdrawal of the Soviet army from Hungary, removal of farms from state ownership and, perhaps most crucially of all, that Hungary should leave the Warsaw Pact and declare neutrality in the Cold War.

Khrushchev refused to accept Hungary leaving the Warsaw Pact, not least because it would leave the USSR somewhat exposed to Western Europe through Austria to the West.

Soviet tanks and soldiers soon entered Hungary to crackdown on the protests. Hungarians tried to flee but were blocked from leaving the country, many were killed or injured. Some 26,000 Hungarians were tried, leading to imprisonment and execution. Prime Minister Nagy was himself arrested and executed, to be replaced by János Kádár who crushed the remaining resistance.

An exodus of thousands of refugees fled Hungary and it was not long before the first of those refugees arrived from mainland Europe by ferry into Dover Marine Station.



Hungarian refugees on their way to England 1956

The Rotary Club in the form of *Dover Express* reporter Terry Sutton, was there to meet them.

"The British government warned the Mayor of Dover (Cllr Sydney Kingsland) that a 'score or more' refugees were expected to arrive in Dover" with a request from Whitehall to ensure they were welcomed.

Terry later recalled, "Dover's mayor and town clerk requested my help, as a member of The Round Table, in organising the reception of the refugees. I asked fellow members of The Round Table for their support, and they agreed."

The army barracks in Dover were empty of troops, so Connaught Barracks were taken over as a refugee camp."

As a point of information, the 1st Battalion The West Yorkshire Regiment (The Prince of Wales's Own) were on garrison duties in Northern Ireland during 1955-56 and were soon to arrive at Connaught Barracks where, in 1958, they would merge with the East Yorkshire Regiment (The Duke of York's Own) to form The Prince of Wales's Own Regiment of Yorkshire.



Connaught Barracks, Rebuilt in 1962

Terry Sutton continues: "Whitehall provided food, while my Round Table mates and I took over the responsibility of entertaining hundreds of refugees.

Paper for letter-writing was provided while football matches against local teams were organised. This task continued for about two weeks before national organisations such as the Red Cross took over from we weary Round-Tablers."

Between 19th November and 3rd December 1956, 4221 refugees arrived at Dover. The Immigration Service, numbering fewer than 400 staff including managers, nationally was increasingly hard pressed, covering as it did 30 different ports across the United Kingdom twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

An estimated total of some 20,000 Hungarian refugees arrived in Britain, welcomed as heroes, with people anxious to ensure they could enjoy the forthcoming Christmas. In all, over twenty member states of the UN responded to calls for assistance as approximately 200,000 people, or 2% of the population, left Hungary, most of them crossing by foot into Austria.

Joe Szarvas was a 21-year-old mineworker who joined others raiding the Communist party headquarters for weapons which they used to attack the Russian troops. "The euphoria was tangible for every Hungarian," he said. He was later sentenced to hang for his part in the uprising but "I escaped on 'St Peter's bicycle' (by foot)." While he was in a refugee camp in Austria the British arrived and said, "Listen, young man, if you want to come to Britain, we will give you pocket money and a job." Soon he was being given a slap-up meal in barracks near Swindon as a guest of the army. "The only English

word I had was 'thank you,' but the *Tommies* taught us every swearword there was by the end of the night."

Matyas Sarkosi was a 19-year-old trainee journalist who escaped by crossing a river under fire from Russian troops. He walked across what turned out to be a minefield into Austria and the refugee camp in Graz. One day, a woman in a WVS (Women's Voluntary Service) uniform asked all those who wanted to come to Britain to line up behind her, he said. "I had a vision of Britain as a dark place with cobblestones and *Oliver Twist* running round picking pockets." Students were welcomed into the universities, and he went to St Martin's School of Art, going on to work for the BBC and become a successful novelist.

Boxer Joe Bugner, born József Kreul Bugner, who arrived in the UK as a young boy, became the British heavyweight champion and fought Muhammad Ali for the world title. Louis Permyer, a pastry chef, started Louis' Patisserie in Hampstead North London. His first impression of Britain was of "a grey and foggy place. No one could cook properly so I thought I would try my luck."

Associated Press footage of refugees arriving from Ostend can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T6IhvC53c>
HUNGARIAN REFUGEES LAND AT DOVER - NO SOUND

While Queen Juliana of The Netherlands bids welcome to Hungarian refugees thanks to British Pathe again without a soundtrack.

<https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/253617/>
Queen Juliana Bids Welcome to Hungarian Refugees (1956)

I do not usually publish poems but, although early, the committee would like to wish all our members a happy Christmas and prosperous new year.

The reason Rudolph is not mentioned in the poem.

Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer is a fictional reindeer created by Robert L. May, and first appeared in a 1939 booklet written by May and published by Montgomery Ward & Co. the U.S. department store & U.S. retail corporation.

Editor

‘Twas the Night before Christmas

Clement Clarke Moore (1823)

Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse;
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,
In hopes that St. Nicholas would soon be there.

The children were nestled all snug in their beds,
While visions of sugar-plums danced in their heads.
And Mamma in ‘kerchief, and I in my cap,
Had just settled down for a long winter’s nap.

When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter,
I sprang from my bed to see what was the matter.
Away to the window I flew like a flash,
Tore open the shutters and threw up the sash.

The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow
Gave lustre of mid-day to the objects below,
When, what to my wondering eyes should appear?
But a miniature sleigh, and eight tiny reindeer.

With a little old driver, so lively and quick,
I knew in a moment it must be St. Nick.
More rapid than eagles his coursers they came,
And he whistled, and shouted, and called them by name:

“Now DASHER! Now DANCER! Now PRANCER! And VIXEN!
On COMET! On CUPID! On DONNER! And BLITZEN!
To the top of the porch! To the top of the wall!
Now dash away! Dash away! Dash away all!”

As dry leaves that before the wild hurricane fly,
When they meet with an obstacle, mount to the sky.
So up the house top the coursers they flew,
With the sleigh full of toys and St. Nicholas too.

And then in a twinkling, I heard on the roof
The prancing and pawing of each tiny hoof.
As I drew in my hand and was turning around
Down the chimney St. Nicholas came with a bound.

He was dress all in fur, from his head to his foot,
And his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot:
A bundle of toys he had flung on his back
And he looked like a peddler just opening his pack.

His eyes how they twinkled! His dimples hoe merry!
His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry!
His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow
And beard of his chin was as white as the snow.

The stump of a pipe he held tight in his teeth,
And smoke it encircled his head like a wreath.
He had a broad face and a little round belly,
That shook, when he laughed like a bowlful of jelly.

He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf,
And I laughed when I saw him, in spite of myself:
A wink of his eye and a twist of his head,
Soon gave me to know I had nothing to dread.

He spoke not a word, but went straight to his work,
And filled all the stockings, then turned with a jerk.
And laying his finger alongside his nose,
And giving a nod, up the chimney he rose.

He sprang to his sleigh, to his team, gave a whistle,
And away they all flew like the down of a thistle.
But I heard him exclaim, ere he drove out of sight,
MERRY CHRISTMAS TO ALL, AND TO ALL A GOODNIGHT!!