

# Out of Hungary: Into American Homes Refugees from oppression begin a ...

By GERTRUDE SAMUELS

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ESCAPE—Fleeing such scenes of tanks and terror as this in their native country, Hungarian refugees land on a cold day in Milwaukee.



## Out of Hungary

By GERTRUDE SAMUELS

MILWAUKEE.  
AT 9 o'clock on Friday morning, Nov. 23, as hundreds of well-wishers watched from the North Terminal, a silver-and-blue plane touched down at General Mitchell field here. It had been flying for twenty-five air hours from Vienna. Seventy-three men, women and children, ranging in age from 57 years to four months—refugees from Hungary—came out of that plane. Some women wore babushkas and carried small bundles. Some wept. The men looked shabby, nervous, eager. Some tried a hello—"Jo reggelt" ("Good morning").

They sang their national anthem. "God bless the Hungarian people . . . bring them better years. . . ."

A priest, a minister, a rabbi and civic leaders helped speed them through the customs and health examinations. When it was discovered that some did not have smallpox inoculations, a health officer administered them on the spot.

Chartered city buses took the newcomers, with a motorcycle police escort, to St. Emeric's Hungarian Church on North Seventeenth Street for a thanksgiving service, then on to one of Milwaukee's best hotels, the Pfister, for a fine lunch. Accommodations were

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waiting at the Pfister for as long as the refugees needed them.

But within a few days after arrival, every one of the newcomers was living "like an American" in a private home, on a farm, at a young men's club. Jobs had been found for all who could take them.

What follows is the story of how one of these families fleeing from Hungary's oppressors—the largest of this first group to reach Milwaukee—adjusted in its first week in America. It is also the story of how the citizens of one American city, greatly moved by the plight and courage of the Hungarians, found a humane way to show they cared.

THE Aukerman home, a white, cement-stucco house in a modest residential part of town, was alive with children's laughter and the murmurings of adults.

Mrs. Ann Aukerman, pert, brown-haired and 40, bustled about her spacious kitchen fixing a lunch of platters of cold cuts, potatoes, bread and butter, coffee and fruit that seemed large enough for a regiment. Helping her and responding eagerly to her fluent Hungarian (she was raised in Hungary) were two women, one older, one younger. Their dress was all similar, all American—good skirts and sweaters, good shoes. Their faces were relaxed, as though they were old friends.

"They don't go for the fancy stuff,"

## Into American Homes

Mrs. Aukerman said. "They don't like the raw salads and raw lettuce. They're solid people. They like solid food."

Her husband, Lewis Aukerman, came in from his shopping, his arms full of groceries. He looked over his "family" of seven newcomers with a sort of parental pride. There had been eight until the day before, when one left with an uncle from McKeesport, Pa.

AUKERMAN left the women to their job and took a moment to sit with the men and children in his large, typically Midwestern living room with its roomy couch and chairs, fireplace, bookcases and shelves adorned with family pictures.

They had no common language. Lewis Aukerman and his new friends—Lewis is a third-generation American of German descent. But the warmth and hospitality pervading this home, the small courtesies—the lighting of a cigarette, the casual "O. K.?" teasingly echoed by the children—were reflected in the men's and boys' quiet eyes and smiles.

The Ekkers had been sharing the Aukerman home since the second day of their arrival in America. Aukerman had simply gone to the Pfister, where a reception and resettlement headquarters had been set up, and said that he could take some refugees in his house, say six or eight. He had a ten-room house with four bedrooms upstairs, he explained. He owned some real estate

and managed some apartment buildings. He'd like to help some of the refugees get started right. He didn't care who they were.

He was asked to take the Ekker family of eight: Ferenc Ekker, a tall, lean, gray-haired man of 51; his wife, Gisella, 46, dark and ruddy-faced; their son, Ferenc, 23, tall and lean like his father; their two nephews, Joseph, 20, and Laszlo, 25; their married daughter, Gisella, 28, whose husband is "somewhere in Hungary," and her two children, 6-year-old Bela, a brown-haired boy with solemn eyes, and 4-year-old Gisella, a blond beauty. They sat together in the waiting room, a clan.

Now, the hurried lunch preparations presaged another busy afternoon for the Aukermans-Ekkers. With the help of local representatives of the Wisconsin State Employment Service and the Society of St. Vincent De Paul, the resettlement arm of the Catholic Relief Services, jobs had been found for the working members of the new family.

Young Ferenc, an experienced factory worker, was to work as a turret-lathe hand with the Artos Engineering Company on the South Side of Milwaukee, starting on the second shift at the regular contract wage of \$2.02 an hour. After lunch, Aukerman drove him to his new job for the first time. Aaken Olsen, who owns Artos, had also taken on another Hungarian, an assembly-line worker. Among the 180 employees of his factory, which makes cutting

## Refugees from oppression begin a new life with the help of warm-hearted Milwaukeeans.

and stripping machinery for electrical wiring, were many refugees and D. P.'s of earlier migrations. "We use the sign language for those who don't understand," Olsen's foreman said.

THERE had been a momentary disappointment the day before for the older Ferenc, a meat-cutter and packer in Hungary, when a promised job didn't materialize—another Milwaukee family had already placed their refugee in it. But the placement committee had found similar work, not only for the father but also for his nephew, Joseph, with the Strauss Brothers Meat Packing Company. Both were to start work there the next morning, and they were beside themselves with relief and gratitude.

"There is so much good here," the older Ferenc said.

And Gisella, the young mother, also had a job to start on. Shepherded by an Aukerman, the family went off to St. Mary's Hospital, where Sister Hermine, the administrator, crisply and kindly instructed Gisella in kitchen duties through an interpreter. She explained that the work was temporary until Gisella learned English; then she would be transferred to clerical work, for which she had been trained in Hungary. The great, modern hospital stunned and delighted the refugees.

Later, the Aukermans drove the

Ekker family to the St. Vincent De Paul salvage store where they looked over second-hand furnishings for their own home. For, in a few days, Mr. Aukerman planned to make available to them a four-room apartment in one of his buildings. It would be theirs, rent-free, he said, until they got on their feet. The furnishings would cost them nothing.

Contributions from the people of Milwaukee—toys, clothing, furniture and bedding—filled the two-story building. There was nothing lavish, but enough to choose from, and the older Ekkers told the manager what they expected their minimum needs to be.

AS they drove back to the Aukerman house—with its capacious front porch and capacious hospitality—Aukerman casually let drop the information that his mother had taken in a Hungarian family also; the husband had started work as a machine operator. "We'll try to get them an apartment, too," he promised.

The older Ferenc said in Hungarian to Ann Aukerman, "We did not even dream of this goodness and kindness of the American people."

A biting chill was in the air outside, but a hearty, simple dinner was ready to warm the Hungarians—beef goulash, boiled potatoes, green peas, bread and butter, coffee. Afterward, like any American family, they gathered in the (Continued on Page 71)



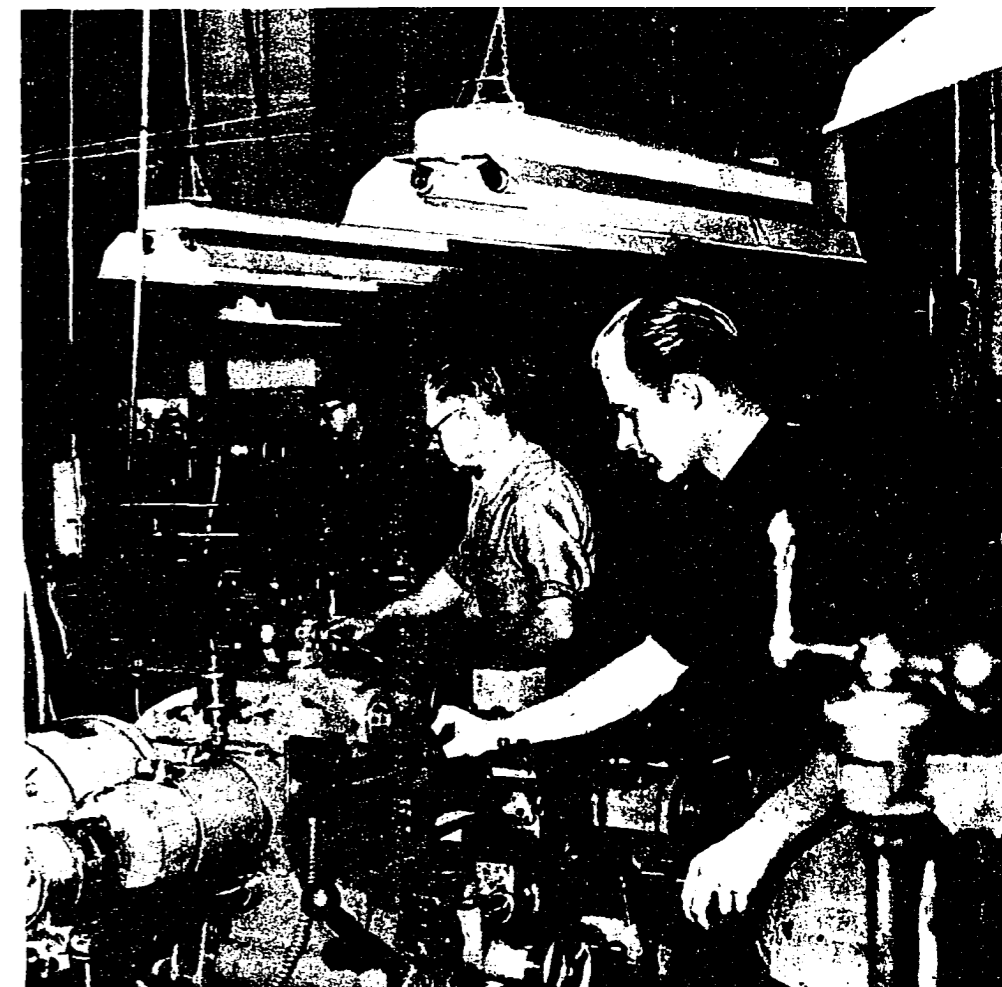
WELCOME—Within two days of their arrival in Milwaukee the Ekkers, Hungarian refugees, are guests of Ann and Lewis Aukerman (center), who make them feel at home with a goulash dinner.



WARMTH—In their comfortable living room, adorned with family pictures, the Aukermans help Ferenc Ekker, 51, right, plan for the future. Mrs. Ekker shares the



sofa with her grandson, 6; at left, the Ekkers' daughter, Gisella, whose husband still is "somewhere in Hungary," talks with her 4-year-old child.



WORK—By the end of the first week in their new life all the working Ekkers had found jobs. Son Ferenc (foreground) is a turret-lathe hand for a Milwaukee firm that employs many refugees.

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living room to watch television.

Thus in just a few days had come the first adjustments to their temporary home, to new jobs, to a future in freedom—perhaps, above all, to kindness and trust again.

Yet it was only a few weeks since the Ekkers, like the other refugees on the plane, were facing a most desperate future and despaired of finding their way to freedom.

**T**HE Ekkers will have the events of Oct. 26, 1956, forever burned in their memories. On that day, at 11 o'clock in the morning, seventy-six of their townspeople in Hungary—men, women, youths and children—were murdered in cold blood on the street as they gathered in a demonstration before the secret police headquarters.

Their town (they asked that its name not be printed since they had left relatives and friends behind) is near the Austrian border—a small town, part farming, part industrial. The Ekkers had lived there for a generation. The older Ferenc, an ambulance driver during World War II, had been an independent meat packer until 1951, when his property came under Government control. Daughter Gisella's husband was a statistician; the nephews, who lived with them, did factory work or drove tractors.

In recent months, after the downgrading of Stalin, the people in their town had felt a little lighter in spirit, freer to meet, to discuss, to have—as Ekker puts it—"ideas." Some of the young men started to criticize the Government openly as they met for "discussion evenings."

Their spirit spread throughout the town. Popular demonstrations soon began, demanding that the red stars be taken down from factory buildings. On the morning of Oct. 26, a group of demonstrators went with such demands to the headquarters of the hated A. V. H. (Allam Vedelmi Hatosag), the Hungarian secret police organization, at the edge of town. The police let them advance, then opened fire and killed them all.

Even after the townspeople buried their dead—Ekker's closest friend among them—they hoped for a better future. Premier Imre Nagy had come back, and it looked as though they might yet have a decent life. Then on Tuesday, Oct. 30, Russian troops moved into their town with eighty tanks. A 5 o'clock curfew was imposed. The Russians shot all who disobeyed it.

Stories of youth deportations began filtering in, and the older Ekker made up his mind: the three young men had to get away. He went with them by bicycle to a village at the Austrian border; there the young men left their bikes and went on foot into Austria to an agreed meeting place. Ekker bicycled home.

The next day, the rest of the Ekkers, carrying one suitcase and a bundle of clothes for the children, followed them by horsecart and on foot, all except Gisella's husband, who felt that he must find his mother in another town. He has not been heard from since.

Over the border, the Ekkers were given some schillings by a kindly Austrian to help them buy bus tickets to Vienna. They found thousands of their compatriots there, many of them with but one thought—"the American Consulate."

\* \* \*

**O**NE evening during the time that tragedy was striking Ekkers' town, some 5,000 miles away in Milwaukee, Charles O'Neill sat in deep thought in his brick house in the northwest part of town. Charles is 52, the father of four children, a soft-spoken, direct-talking man with bland, blue eyes and a habit of taking some things literally. Like President Eisenhower's statement that he wanted America to accept 5,000 Hungarian refugees, and accept them fast. That Charles O'Neill took very literally.

For twenty-six years Charlie, as everyone he meets calls him, had been a legend in Milwaukee for his work with St. Vincent de Paul, a society that devotes itself to family casework and also, in recent years, to the resettlement of some 2,000 D. P.'s.

Now, ever since press and

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**LEADERS**—Charles O'Neill, right, brought the 73 refugees by plane from Vienna to Milwaukee. Here he relaxes with Larry and Ray Smith who opened their Pfister Hotel, free of charge, to the newcomers.

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radio announcements that America would take some Hungarian refugees, offers of sponsors, jobs and homes had been pouring in, jamming St. Vincent's telephone lines. "The people really care," Charlie reflected in his home that evening.

**T**HIS city of 700,000 on the west shore of Lake Michigan is a community of two-family homes and a lovely lake front, of heavy industry as well as the breweries that have made it famous, a leisurely city of two-score nationalities ("You name 'em, we've got 'em") that prides itself on its "Milwaukee *Gemuetlichkeit*."

Charlie had already put "a firm order" in to the New York officials of his society on the basis of Milwaukee assurances, and he realized that the number "seemed just right for about a plane load of them." He suddenly decided, as he sat alone, "I believe I'll go to Vienna and see for myself, and get these people for whom I have the assurances." To Charlie, it seemed routine enough. His superiors promptly said, "By all means go. Get all the information you can and bring it back for all the dioceses in the country."

A few hours before his plane took off the next day, Charlie called his old friend, Ray Smith, who owns the Pfister Hotel. They talked about his project. Ray Smith offered to do what he could to be of any help.

And Charlie said, almost routinely, that he'd take him up on that. He'd be bringing back a plane load. He'd need housing for about seventy persons, he reckoned, till they could be resettled. Smith answered, "Bring them in, Charlie."

In Vienna, Charlie O'Neill had difficulty getting into the American Consulate for the mobs of milling, pleading refugees outside.

"We've promised our people in Milwaukee," he told the American officials, "that we'd have a plane load by Wednesday." Asked what kind of people he wanted, he answered explosively, "Just people! You do the choosing. Our people have opened their hearts and their homes." Secretly, he re-

calls, he hoped "for a good mixture, not only Catholics."

**C**HARLIE got his plane load of seventy-three, partly in Vienna, partly in Munich. He flew back with them in a Flying Tiger plane, chartered and paid for by the I. C. E. M. (Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration), supported by twenty-seven nations. It flew directly to Milwaukee "to avoid having to process them through New York." The Ekker family was among them, disheveled and weary, to be sure, but joyous to be "entering America."

Ray Smith was as good as his word. Three floors of the Pfister had been prepared for the refugees—the sixth and the eighth for living purposes with all the normal hotel services; the seventh (the banquet floor) for their dining room, commissary and clothing depot. The hotel fed and housed them free. The barbers stayed overtime to give them haircuts and spruce them up. Department stores and individuals rushed in new clothes and new shoes. People came in off the street to offer the coats on their backs. Volunteers came in to interpret and help in any way.

**F**ROM the moment that the plane touched down, the Milwaukee spirit seemed to reach out to protect the tired and heroic newcomers, to make them feel that their new home could be good.

The civic effort became broadly cooperative. Representatives of the Wisconsin State Employment Service, the United States Department of Labor and private and religious agencies set up shop on the seventh floor of the hotel. They worked around the clock, card-indexing the refugees, interviewing them, finding homes, contacts and jobs for them. D. P.'s, not long in the country themselves, came in to offer their homes and help.

By next morning, the refugees, rested, well-fed and newly outfitted, had thrown away their feelings of terror and apprehension with their old clothes. Charlie O'Neill had been on the phone since 4 A. M.

"I'm able to make a lot of contacts at 4 in the morning," he explained. "I find that

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**NEW YORK**—Gisella, a young mother who recently fled her native Hungary, is instructed by Sister Hermine in her kitchen duties at St. Mary's Hospital, Milwaukee. Later she will be given a clerical job.

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that's the best time to find people at home."

Harold Watson, an insurance company executive who has a 14-year-old son at home, took a young freedom fighter into his home. "We can't speak one another's language, but the boys will be able to understand one another soon enough," he said cheerfully. He decided that the youngster, who had worked as a railroad track laborer in Hungary, was too young for work; the boy will enter school in the new term.

Other youths were similarly placed. The Aukermans came for their family.

**A**T the end of just one week, this was the picture:

Fifty-seven of the seventy-three refugees had found homes with thirty-two Milwaukee families; ten had left Milwaukee for placement in homes and jobs in Chicago, Decatur, Cleveland and McKeesport; one had gone to a farm in St. Cloud, Wis.; five youths were living in a young men's club.

With the job placements there had been one or two setbacks. One former prisoner from a forced-labor camp needed psychiatric help. Another refugee, a driver, declined at first to accept work at less than \$2 an hour "because I must send money to Hungary to help my relatives." But for the most part, those who could work were already in jobs.

Thirty-two placements had been made, ranging from machine operators, molders and general factory workers to restaurant and hotel workers and maids.

The great cooperative civic-philanthropic effort brought praise both from local labor unions and from leaders of government and business.

It was, incidentally, in remarkable contrast with the refugee operation in the New York area. There, the first taste of American life for the refugees is a primitive barracks set in the desolate acres of Camp Kilmer, N. J., under Army control and subject to physical hardships. And New Yorkers, whatever their good intentions, have practically no contact with that relatively

small group of heroes of Hungarian resistance. What mystified Milwaukeeans experienced in refugee work was why New York needed the Army.

Now with the new plan to admit 21,500 Hungarian refugees to the United States, there is a strong feeling that the planloads should be flown straight to their destinations—to the cities and communities and industrial centers that want and need them—and thus avoid needless delays or hardships in barracks living.

**A**S the first phase of the refugee saga ended and integration went forward, Milwaukeeans seemed slightly perplexed that outsiders were impressed with the speed and compassion of their joint civic-philanthropic effort.

As Charlie O'Neill put it: "To us, it didn't seem that we were doing anything unusual at all." With the help of the Mayor, labor, business, civic and religious leaders are already working out plans to continue the cooperative effort for further settling of refugees here.

Meanwhile, the Ekkers, who have relatives in New York, had a hard time putting their feelings into words. The head of the clan nodded his handsome gray head in gentle disbelief.

"It has all been so quick," he said. "The Aukermans have done so much, so willingly. We did not even know them."

"Now, with time, we want our children to grow here. We have always been a close family. We want that we should never have to separate."

**E**VEN before the Ekkers were ready to depart for their own apartment, the Aukermans were busy with new arrangements. They had long been waiting for their own relatives, D. P.'s in Germany, to be allowed to come to America. Meantime, they arranged that, after the Ekkers were settled, they would take three young freedom fighters into their home.

"They are young boys, in different places," Lewis Aukerman said. "They need one another. They should be together."