

APPENDIX

J.W. Pickersgill and the Admission of Hungarian Refugees to Ontario, 1956-57

The following is an excerpt from a letter by the Hon. J.W. Pickersgill to the author dated 4 April 1983. It contains interesting information on the coming of Hungarian refugees, and especially refugee students to Canada in 1956-57. Mr. Pickersgill (1905 –) was the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration in 1956.

Dear Professor Dreisziger:

I have waited until I have read the whole of *Struggle and Hope* before writing to thank you for giving me a copy. ... I wish I might have talked to you before you did the final text of the migration of 1956-7, not that I have any real quarrel with what you say except on two points. I do not think it is correct to say (that) the federal government yielded to public pressure in its action in November, 1956. Our decision on free passage and chartering planes was made and under way before the *Globe* editorial and before I was approached by the Ontario Government.¹ I had been Minister of Immigration long enough to know (that) no large scale immigration ever gets votes in the short run. Mr. St. Laurent, Walter Harris, L.B.

Pearson² and I thought what we wanted to do was right and we persuaded our colleagues. By the time I returned from Vienna, the Ontario government was not co-operative, though most of the other provincial governments were, including the Duplessis government in Quebec. The Hungarian refugees did not have to meet the admission standards, they had only to apply to the office in Vienna and they were treated on a first come first served basis. The medical examinations took place in Canada; all who passed were landed as immigrants and the rest as visitors until they could pass the medical tests, when they were landed.

My second point is not a difference but a clarification of the sentence on pp, 207-8 that “so many Hungarian students came to Canada in the wake of 1956 that they were regarded as a special class of refugees.” Shortly after my return from Vienna, the immigration officials reported that most receiving countries did not want students. Without consulting the Cabinet, I directed my Deputy Minister to telephone our office in Vienna and give an oral instruction that, without disturbing the official policy of first come first served, every effort was to be made to get students at the head of the queue every day. My reasoning was that the cost might be greater in the short term, but that the long term advantage to Canada would be more than correspondingly greater. I also took a very active part in assuring the admission of Hungarian students in most of the universities throughout Canada. In this effort I received very effective support from Senator and Mrs. Hartland Molson. ...

J.W. Pickersgill

Notes.

1. The editorial in the *Globe and Mail*, demanding a more vigorous refugee admission policy, appeared on 24 November 1956. The decision by the federal government to embark on a generous programme of refugee admission was announced in Ottawa on the 28th of the same month. On this subject see Gerald E. Dirks, *Canada's Refugee Policy: Indifference or Opportunism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 1977), chapter nine, especially pp. 195-99.

2. Louis St-Laurent was Prime Minister of Canada at the time. Walter E. Harris had been Pickersgill's predecessor in the immigration portfolio and was Minister of Finance in 1956, L.B. Pearson was Secretary of State for External Affairs at the time.