

## Portrait of Gusztáv Kecskés D.

### Sciex Fellow and PostDoc in history at the University of Geneva

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*Gusztáv Kecskés D. (45) is a senior research fellow at the Institute of History of the Research Centre for the Humanities of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. He holds a PhD degree of the Université de Paris III Sorbonne (France) and the University of Pécs (Hungary). The main part of his 6-months stay in Geneva is dedicated to archival research in the numerous archives of international governmental and non-governmental organisations in the sphere of the United Nations system. In his postdoctoral research project 'Anatomy of a Humanitarian Miracle' he focuses on the international reception of the Hungarian refugees after the suppressed Hungarian uprising of 1956.*

### From Hungary to Switzerland in 1956

Within days after the eruption of a nationwide revolt against the government of the People's Republic of Hungary in late October 1956 the Soviet Union and other members of the Warsaw Pact were facing a severe threat to the political systems and to the Soviet Union's sphere of influence east of the Iron Curtain.

In the midst of a global political minefield posed by proxy Cold War conflicts and the intense war waging on political, economic, and propaganda fronts, the Soviet Union decided to intervene and crush the rebellion.

Over 2500 Hungarians and hundreds of Soviet troops were killed, and many more were wounded. In the aftermath, a political purge led to thousands of arrests, deportations and executions.

In early November, nearly 200'000 Hungarians were on the run and crossed the border to Austria or to Yugoslavia. Within days the UN Refugee Agency UNHCR, governmental and non-governmental aid agencies launched a remarkable relief operation, resettling over 180'000 refugees to a total of 37 host coun-

tries in just a couple of months. 13'000 Hungarian refugees came to Switzerland.

The dimension and the efficiency of this operation were extraordinary. It was the first larger exodus in Europe since the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War and the way it had been dealt with was stunning.

It is this historically unrivalled humanitarian action that led Gusztáv Kecskés D. to entitle his research project 'The Anatomy of a Humanitarian Miracle': *"There's no irony in the title of my postdoc project. It was a miracle in several senses. One can see a continuous shortage of resources in the refugee reception system in the European states after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. Even in the early Fifties there still were large numbers of refugees in Italy, Austria, Greece or Western Germany. Their situation was usually very lamentable. There were only very few financial means allocated. When the Hungarians came, everything was different. Their cause was practically solved within one year!"*



Refugees board a train that will take them to Switzerland, one of 37 countries that gave asylum to the Hungarians. © UNHCR / 1956

Kecskés' research in Geneva is an important step towards his goal of displaying the anatomy of the miracle by digging up the entanglement of different actors and motives that were brought together in the intent of resolving this crisis: *"A lot of people offered help to*

*the Hungarian refugees on the grounds of their humanitarian principles, while others had a political agenda - especially officials, diplomats and intelligence forces".* At the first peak of tensions of the Cold War such an exodus was welcome propaganda in the West and a valuable source of information.

### **Geneva – a cluster of humanitarianism**

Kecskés' Sciex Fellowship is part of a large research activity on the relationship between Hungary and the United Nations during the Cold War, leading him to archives in nearly a dozen countries. International Geneva is however an ideal spot, as it harbours a cluster of international agencies and NGOs that played a relevant role in his topical research focus. Besides his 'field work' he has the opportunity to network with his host departments' staff and with colleagues at the neighbouring Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies.

His Host Mentor Prof. Dr. Sandrine Kott – an expert in the field of transnational history – invited him to give lectures that on several occasions greatly aroused the interest of external visitors. Kecskés also spots a slight difference between lectures in Budapest and in Geneva: *"it was interesting to see that the ambience during my lecture on the transfer of knowledge by refugees was very vital and there where a lot of discussions. Maybe students in Budapest are a bit more reticent, they do not dare attacking so much."*



Fitr.: Host Mentor Prof. Dr. Sandrine Kott, visiting Home Mentor Prof. Dr. Attila Pók and Fellow Dr. Gusztáv Kecskés D.

Kecskés' Home Mentor Prof. Dr. Attila Pok also held a conference during his Sciex Short-term Visit. While meeting up with researchers from the partner institution was an integral aspect of the visit, it also allowed Kecskés to

introduce his Home Mentor to the library and archives of the United Nations.

### **Topical research**

Transnational history has been booming in the last decade, as archives are releasing and de-classifying documents from the Cold War period. Kecskés research subject is evidently topical, judging by the many media inquiries he received to during his stay. At the same time he had the opportunity to meet several contemporary witnesses, who fled in 1956.

Nevertheless, he looks back on his Sciex Fellowship as a time free of stress and unburdened by administrative aspects of academic bureaucracy. In fact, he had the time to focus on preparing his monograph, due to be published as a 'habilitation thesis' next year that will pave his way to a full professorship.

Kecskés' writing and archival activity during his Sciex Fellowship has given him plenty of material for articles, as he says: *"I wrote four chapters for my monograph and I am about to submit two of them to specialised journals. Moreover I will publish a series of sources on 'Week days of a global humanitarian action' online, containing the records of the meetings of the Coordination Committee for Assistance to Refugees from Hungary in 56' and 57'. As all important actors where assembled it gives a very nice global perspective on the daily rhythm of an orchestrated humanitarian action."* This will certainly encourage other historians to profit from his groundwork in Geneva, for instance his students: *"I want to start teaching on the history of migration and in Geneva I had the opportunity to amass literature and photocopy a lot of sources I intend to use for my classes."*

### **Migration in past and present**

Migration studies are a prospect for a future collaboration with his contacts in Geneva. *"Our institute in Budapest has a research group on migration from east to west and it would be a very beneficial continuation to work with our partners at the University of Geneva."* In the meantime his Host Mentor and other members of the host institute are due to hold conferences in Budapest.

Migration is not only topical in historical re-

search, but also as a typical feature of a researcher's curriculum nowadays. *"Today, Hungarian research institutes expect their staff to have a mobility background and to master foreign languages."* Hungarian academia is clearly intensifying its integration into the European Higher Education Area, an effort all other European countries are making too. This does not come without a downside, as Kecskés points out: *"We are currently experiencing a problematic situation for Hungary, as for instance a lot of medical doctors are leaving the country. Emigrating is of course a very beneficial strategy for an individual, but has disastrous consequences for the society. At the same time universities have faced big financial cuts. Evidently changes in this respect need to be made to the system."*

The Sciex Fellowship has given Kecskés a half-year of valuable research in Geneva, adding to his extensive international experience. While he will miss the calm of his stay when re-assuming his position at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, he is looking forward to being reunited with his family. *"Alas, it would have been a good experience for the kids to be put to school in multilingual Switzerland but six months were too short to have my wife and four children come along"* he smiles.

The returning Sciex Fellow will however not turn up empty-handed at his Home Institution: *"My research in Geneva was not only to my personal benefit but also to the overhead project at my institute in Budapest. I was fascinated by the convergence of the two blocs in the UN during the Cold War, particularly within Geneva's UN organisations. The blocs cooperated even during the years, when tension was at its high point in the Fifties. These relations nurtured across the Iron Curtain generate a new interpretation of the Cold War, differing from what a traditional focus on conflict-laden security issues, as treated in New York's UN General Assembly and Security Council, would have!"*

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Sciex Fellow Gusztáv Kecskés D. at the archives of the Lutheran World Federation.

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