

## Eyewitness about Hungarian revolution 1956

By Shirley Popiel

To be at the right place at the right time one must accept the circumstances accordingly. Life does not allow you choices, it has its own agenda.

Oct 1956, the law of averages made me come to that conclusion. Having been transferred to the Immigration Department's typing pool a few weeks earlier, I had had time barely to settle myself into my new department.

Upon opening the door on this particular morning, I was confronted with pandemonium - files round my desk, and telephones had a new personality - they never stopped.

When greeting my supervisor, she told me the Hungarian Revolution had started, "put your shoulder to the wheel". I was told I had just been made Typist for Trades. People in all corridors were bumping into each other, files and papers spilling all over the floor, people swearing under thin breathe, to get to their offices as quickly as possible. The Australian government had promised to get as many as possible Hungarian immigrants to Australia under the Assisted Passage Scheme. This could take up to 2 years to pay for your passage to the Immigration Dept. in Australia, and then give you the choice to stay, or go elsewhere.

I realized instantly I was in the midst of turmoil of an East European country. Hungary was on its knees and was being overrun by communist Russia. Not a pleasant prospect. Very quickly a trickle became a flood of refugees across the border of terrified people into Austria, until it became a continual stream day and night. In the end Austria could not afford to feed another country of many thousands, it was decided with the Austrian government to fly them out to Berlin, where they were transferred to other airlines to fly to England to be processed through British Immigration. The Russians had arrived on their doorstep with no indication previously of their arrival. There were thieves, minders, an artist, whatever, who did not want to be arrested by the communists, as they had a pest. Eventually landed up in being detained in England by government agencies. Many had false passports.

There was a strict rule not to contact "Aliens" department as they were completely overloaded. After 2-3 days someone had thrown the telephones on the floor, and had to be stuck together with scotch tape. The 2 dons to the typing pool were working overtime with the typewriter mechanics. They were being cleaned and oiled, to give everyone a good typing speed. As I remember my mother for my 3 piano examinations, she would contact a blind piano tuner. This was excellent, as testing the keys after the tuner had left, they were extremely susceptible to touch. This was before I really got down to business with practice for the examination.

The rules for 36 typists and stenographers were part in place the same day - no-one to get married, birthday party, anniversaries, whatever. Overtime Tuesday and Thursday

evenings till 9PM, plus Saturdays 9AM-3PM.

The communists had come out with the genuine refugees, and had kidnapped 1 or 2 of a family including children. They told the terrified refugees that if they did not return to Hungary, then relatives would be shot. But then relatives had been killed in the fighting. If they were able to escape from the communists they would run into the patio of Australia House. If they could not speak English, they were sent up at once to "Aliens" department to see what they wanted. When they were understood, we had 2 phases. One was black for the police on the street, the other for Scotland Yard. This was to get the communist and take them to the cells. The police would break down the doors front and back. The refugees were once more reunited with their family. This routine went on for 6 weeks until once more our duties were resumed.

For myself, sleep had become a luxury a novelty. One morning I collapsed in the typing pool, flat on the floor. Was examined in medical division, and told to go home for a week. My supervisor telephoned me to come in and collect my pay in accounting department. The next day to collect my vacation pay. Accounting thought I had become a revolving door for my own devices.

Two or three days later took the midnight train to Scotland. As the communists had a list who they wanted of people who had organized the revolution, it was decided to fly the men out at once by Quantas Airways. The time was the essence of the contract. The women and children would go by ship to arrive there after 6 weeks, 26,000 miles. The men would have a job by the time their families arrived, and their names changed for the rest of their lives.

Approximately 18 months later I had an envelope delivered to my desk, asking me to attend a reception to meet the Queen Mother. I think word got around I was making preparation to sail for Canada. I was one of many that afternoon to meet her. I shall never forget her corn-flower blue eyes. It was the happiest day of my life.