

First Lady visits refugee village

RA 13-7-89
Susan Viets in Budapest

YESTERDAY was the day the US First Lady, Mrs Barbara Bush, set about business in Hungary, visiting a tiny refugee settlement at the village of Tahitofalu, 28 miles north of Budapest.

About 300 refugees and villagers were on hand to greet the First Lady. Mrs Bush made no speeches. She was treated to an hour of Hungarian folk singing and dancing, punctuated with the odd English language favourite, like *My Bonnie Lies Over The Ocean*. She joined in the chorus and kicked up her green leather heels in polite appreciation of the festivities.

Mrs Bush admired lace doilies, sampled Hungarian bread and marvelled at local choir-girls dressed in ethnic costumes — red velveteen vests with gold brocade and matching skirts.

Among the refugees in the audience were some of the 125 families from Transylvania, the ethnic Hungarian region in Romania, who will be housed in the settlement.

Yesterday, State Minister, Mr Laszlo Kovacs, estimated there are now 20,000 to 30,000 Romanian refugees in Hungary. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees is setting up an office in Budapest.

The press circular for the visit states that project organisers had to fight "to overcome some local resistance to

refugee settlement". With Hungary experiencing a housing crisis, local residents sometimes resent refugees' quick access to accommodation.

Yesterday the atmosphere was welcoming. "It is good that the refugees have a place here but it is terrible they have been driven away from their own homes," said a local agriculturalist, Mrs Budai Mihalyne.

Relations between Hungary and Romania are strained, to say the least. Border crossings, the refugees say, can be harrowing and Romanian President Ceausescu's policy of forced assimilation of minorities includes a village demolition scheme aimed at levelling many of the ethnic Hungarian villages in Transylvania.

Romania recently erected a fence at the border, taken down just before the summit meeting in Bucharest.

At the end of the day, Mrs Bush, clad in a long-sleeved pale blue and white suit, climbed aboard the Cadillac shipped over from the US for the presidential tour. She was driven down the dirt roads of the settlement, flanked by freshly dug ditches.

She left behind a crowd of villagers surrounded by chickens and an empty field stretching off into the distance. Only one house now stands but it is the beginning of a community being built to replace those lost in Romania, and has met with the approval of the US.

13 July 1989

Reproduced with permission from the *Guardian*