

## **Part II**

# **Noteworthy Immigrants from Hungary**

### *Introduction*

Since the middle of the nineteenth century close to eight hundred thousand Hungarians have come to North America. Today, they and their descendants number over one million in the United States and about one hundred and forty thousand in Canada.\* While the majority of this mass of Hungarian immigrants have been what might be called "ordinary people," a few were individuals with extraordinary gifts and uncommon personalities. Through their talents, dedication and perseverance, these outstanding immigrants have made lasting contributions not only to their own immigrant community, but to the cultural development of the whole of North American society. We are pleased to present studies on two such individuals: the Hungarian-American poet György Gyékényesi (1932-1973), and the Hungarian-Canadian musician Géza de Kresz (1882-1959).

Several interesting coincidents can be noted about the two essays. The first is that they both commemorate an anniversary, 1982 being the fiftieth anniversary of Gyékényesi's birth and the hundredth of Kresz'. The second coincidence is that each essay is written by a close relative of the individual discussed. The article on Gyékényesi is by his sister, Katherine Gyékényesi Gatto; while the essay on Kresz is by his daughter, Mária Kresz. It is also worthy of note that both authors are distinguished persons

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\**Estimates of the numbers of Hungarians in North America differ. For a recently published discussion on this subject, see Professor Paul Bódy's study "Emigration in Hungary, 1880-1956," in N.F. Dreisziger et al. Struggle and Hope: The Hungarian-Canadian Experience (Toronto: McClelland Stewart, 1982; especially pp. 28 and 51-3.*

in their own right: Dr. Kresz is a noted writer and academic in Hungary, while Professor Gatto is a young scholar of comparative literature teaching at an American university. A further coincidence is the fact that the essays were submitted to the *Review* unsolicited, a circumstance which helps to explain the different approaches the two authors take to present and analyse the work and legacies of György Gyékényesi and Géza de Kresz.

It is hoped that these two studies will be a useful contribution to the understanding of the overall theme of immigrant, in particular, Hungarian immigrant contributions to the development of North American society. It is also hoped that they will inspire other writers to explore the work and accomplishment of other remarkable Hungarian immigrants and thereby help future social scientists and historians achieve a more complete and more penetrating synthesis of the role of immigrants in the growth and evolution of North American culture.

N.F.D.

*GYÖRGY GYÉKÉNYESI, HUNGARIAN-AMERICAN POET  
(1932-1973)*

György István Gyékényesi, Hungarian-American Poet, was born in Gyékényes, Hungary on October 20, 1932, and died in Cleveland, Ohio on May 25, 1973. From May 29, 1973 until December 17, 1974 his body lay in Calvary Cemetery, Cleveland, from where it was transported to Hungary and reburied in the town of Mohács.

The poet arrived in New York City with his parents, two brothers and a sister on August 17, 1951, as a Displaced Person and Permanent Resident. In 1952, he was drafted into the U.S. Air Force, spending his service time in Kansas, Texas, and Alaska. He attained the rank of Sergeant and was honorably discharged in 1956. In 1955 he became a naturalized citizen and in September of the following year he commenced studies in Mechanical Engineering at the University of Akron, receiving his degree in June, 1961. Initially hired by IBM as a mechanical engineer, Gyékényesi changed jobs in 1962 and went to work for NASA Lewis Research Center, where he remained until his death in 1973. In June, 1965, he received a Master's Degree from the Case Institute of Technology, Cleveland, and in June, 1972, the Ph.D.

degree from Michigan State University, both of them in Mechanical Engineering.

After graduating from the University of Akron, Gyékényesi established his residence in Cleveland's Buckeye neighborhood (a Hungarian ethnic community), where he lived with his wife and three children and spent his artistically most creative years. He founded and was director of the Hungarian Theater and Dance Association of Cleveland, and in the same capacity sponsored performances there by touring European actors. In December, 1972, the political and cultural monthly *Nemzetőr* (The Guardian), in Munich, West Germany, published his first volume of poetry *Karikázó*. A posthumous volume was published by the same press in 1975, entitled *Karámország*.

With the publication of the first anthology, reviews of the book appeared in many leading newspapers of the exiled Hungarian community both in Europe and America, all of them favorable. Gyékényesi's name as a poet already had been established through the publication of his poems in Hungarian journals and newspapers. Most recently, his poetry has appeared in Hungary in a textbook, *Beszéljünk magyarul* (Let's speak Hungarian) (Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 1979) and in an anthology of emigrant Hungarian poets *Vándorének* (Wanderer's song, the title of one of his poems as well) (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1981). In addition to his success as a poet, Gyékényesi was also the author of many papers and publications related to his work at the NASA Lewis Space Research Center.

The following quotations best characterize his personality and poetry:

"I grew to be a Hungarian in the emigration, after 1945. Instead of instinctively experienced Hungarianness, I learned to abstract and thus resolve my objective world in an abstract Hungarian concept.

I look for my personal humanness in universalities. I see the sense of human existence perhaps in solitude, in a praying Christ-like solitude which creates consciousness. I'm not a misanthrope, but I do assert that the final cause of lifeless massiness is the lack of personal consciousness. We talk in vain about such and such consciousness if we gibber like parrots the dogmas of the present juncture and encourage one another to accept personlessness.

In my personal humanness I am a cultural

emigrant. History can pass me by because I don't sit in its chariot. On the other hand, I see more than those who sit in it. I had and have the opportunity to plan and criticize at my own leisure. There isn't any responsibility on my shoulders, except the faithfulness to myself.

Verse isn't a revelation, or an instruction; it isn't even pure aesthetics and euphony. Verse is life itself, moreover, the plus of life.

Poetry doesn't have stabilized coordinates because human consciousness is more than stratified experiences.

So, verse is a dynamic wholeness and this wholeness is guaranteed by the coherence of form and content, which is independent of any fashion in every true verse. True verse, true poetry thus, will be timeless and eternal.

I have often asked myself the question, why do I write? I haven't found an answer to this yet. But it is more of a human thing to build sandcastles, than not to build at all."

(K.G.Y.G.)