

Chapter 2

THROUGH DEPRESSION AND WAR

By the time the ocean flight was completed, Canada was heading towards the gravest economic crisis of her history. The advent of bad times affected every resident of the country but none so badly as recent arrivals. The first to feel the adverse effects of the slump were agricultural workers in the Canadian West, but soon Hungarians elsewhere also began to suffer from the drastic decline in economic activity. Casual workers could no longer count on seasonal or occasional work they had depended on in previous years. Workers with steady jobs often lost them, had to put up with prolonged lay-offs, or had to accept cuts in their wages. Those who were self-employed, faced reduced income or bankruptcy. People with debts often faced the prospect of not being able to pay their creditors and losing their collaterals. As a result, farmers lost their farms, and businessmen lost their stores, shops, etc. Those who lost their livelihood faced dire consequences. In the Canada of the 1930s there were only limited opportunities for people to obtain welfare. Relief payments were hardly enough for people to survive on, and in many municipalities they were restricted to long-term residents only. Immigrants found to be receiving relief were liable to deportation to their country of origin. Thousands of newcomers were deported from Canada in the early years of the Depression. Hundreds of these were Hungarians. Other Hungarians entered camps for the unemployed, established for the purpose of providing subsistence to young men, and for keeping them out of populated areas where they could be the focal point of political disaffection. Members of the camps got board and lodging plus 20 cents a day in return for working on a government construction project.¹

The miserable economic conditions induced many newcomers to

try their luck in other parts of the country. People from the prairies came to Central Canada to look for employment, while Ontarians left for Alberta or British Columbia to do the same. Some people kept travelling for months if not years, forever hoping for a job in some part of the country. Those who had no money for travel did so on the roofs of railway cars. Many Hungarians are known to have been killed when they, tired from the long journey and numb from the cold, fell off these trains.²

In the end some Hungarian immigrants were able to find work. This often happened in parts of the country where only few and small, or no concentrations of Hungarians had existed until then. In the West, Hungarians found employment or farming opportunities in the agricultural districts of the Lower Fraser and Okanagan Valleys of British Columbia, and in the sugar-beet growing regions of Southern Alberta. In Ontario, they found a livelihood in the so-called "tobacco-belt" centered on the towns of Delhi and Tillsonburg.

New Settlement: The Tobacco-Belt

There is good reason to believe that a few Hungarian families had settled in this part of Ontario before the Depression. The 1931 population census found 153 Hungarians in Norfolk County, where much of the tobacco-growing lands of the province exist today. Many of the first tobacco farmers in the region seem to have been of Belgian (Flemish) extraction. At first Hungarians worked on tobacco farms as hired hands. In 1933 so many of them came there to seek work during harvest time that public concern was expressed about them in Delhi. Gradually some of them became share-croppers, while others bought unprofitable farms on the fringes of the tobacco-growing area and converted them to tobacco farms. With perseverance and hard work, some of them became prosperous tobacco farmers. Others, less industrious, less experienced, or just less lucky, failed. Often they were replaced by still other Hungarians who were willing to give this demanding and risky profession a chance. They had few alternatives. In a world with few opportunities a family with no skills other than the knowledge of farming had to turn to the production of some cash crop even if it meant heavy work, much investment, and no guarantee of success. The magnitude of the Hungarians' influx into Norfolk County during the depression years was revealed by the 1941 census figures. By then over 1,300 Hungarians had settled there.³

There were other changes in the life of Ontario's Hungarian community during the Depression as well. One of these was the cessation of large-scale immigration from Hungary. In the 1930s only immediate family members of Hungarians already resident in Canada were allowed in, and even these only if their Canadian relatives could guarantee that they would not become public charges after arrival here. Another change was a dramatic decline in the fertility rate for the Hungarian-Canadian group. One reason for this was the aging of this particular population, another was, no doubt, the discouraging economic outlook for the future. Despite these tendencies toward slower population growth, Ontario's Hungarian community increased by more than 8,000 during the decade between 1931 and 1941 (representing a 60 per cent growth rate). There can be little doubt that much of this growth was the result of the migration of Hungarians to Ontario from the prairie provinces where the effects of the Depression were even more severe than in Central Canada. This influx established Ontario as the province with the largest Hungarian-Canadian population. In 1931 Ontario had about the same Hungarian population as Saskatchewan. By 1941, Ontario's lead had become undisputed. In that year, the province was the home of over 40 per cent of Hungarians in the country. Saskatchewan's share had by then declined to 26.7 per cent.⁴

Political Impact

The Great Depression had a traumatic impact on Hungarian-Canadian society's politics. It greatly increased friction between the conservative and radical factions of the community, a development that accelerated the politicization of this ethnic group. The damage caused would remain with the community for decades.⁵

In order to understand these developments it is necessary to examine some aspects of Hungarian-Canadian society's historical background. Special attention must be paid to two events that took place in Hungary soon after the First World War. One of these was the revolutions (the October, 1918, democratic revolution associated with the person of Mihály Károlyi, and the March, 1919, Commune led by Béla Kun) that shook the country in the wake of the war, and the other was the dismemberment of the old Hungary that took place at the same time and was carved into international law by the Treaty of Trianon of June, 1920. These two developments had a profound effect on the Hungarian community that

evolved in Canada in the 1920s and 1930s. In fact, it might be argued that the aftershocks of these two events were as keenly felt in Hungarian-Canadian society as they were felt by the masses of Hungary.

The chief legacy that the Hungarian revolutions of 1918-19 bequeathed to Hungarian-Canadian society was an ideological split that began growing slowly in the 1920s and which, by the early 1930s had almost totally and irreparably divided Hungarian Canadians between the followers of Marx and members of the Christian-patriotic camp. The origins of this chasm should be sought in the arrival to Canada, during the first half of the 1920s, of former members of Hungary's revolutionary movements. Although their numbers were small, they were joined by people who had left Hungary because of their disillusionment with her ultra-conservative system. By the late 1920s these elements had coalesced into an organization of their own, the Canadian Hungarian Sick-Benefit Federation (C.H.S-B.F.), the predecessor of the Kossuth Federation of the 1940s and 1950s. The C.H.S-B.F. was a part of the communist movement in Canada. Its mouthpiece was the already mentioned paper, the *Worker*.⁶ During the first part of the 1930s, when economic conditions for immigrant workers in Canada were abysmal, the ranks of the Federation swelled, and the split between the radicals and the conservatives (those who stood by "God and country") permeated virtually every Hungarian-Canadian colony and affected every community association.

The impact of the dismemberment of Hungary on the evolution of Hungarian-Canadian society is a more complex matter that requires a longer explanation. In Hungary this event produced what has been called the "Trianon syndrome", a national neurosis that created a pathological preoccupation on the part of most Hungarians with the question of "treaty revision" as the movement for the modification of the peace settlement's territorial provisions was called. In Hungarian-Canadian society the "shock of Trianon" produced a similar, if not more acute syndrome. The reason why Hungarian-Canadian society was more afflicted with the Trianon syndrome than the Hungarian community in the United States, was because of its tender age and the nature of its composition. A large majority of Hungarians in interwar Canada were new arrivals. As such, most of them had experienced the shock of Trianon before their departure to Canada, that is where it was most dramatically felt, in East Central Europe. It is not surprising then that the impact of the peace settlement was keenly ingrained into the minds of these people. At the time of their arrival in Canada, these people exercised

little influence over Hungarian-Canadian community affairs, but as time passed, the newcomers worked their way into positions of influence and by the early 1930s, they had come to dominate many Hungarian immigrant institutions.

There is some historical evidence which makes it possible for us to gage to what extent these immigrant institutions were imbued with the "spirit of revisionism." We may take as an example the *Hungarian Canadian News* of Winnipeg. Established in the winter of 1924-25, the paper had a modest start, but in a few years it became a large, semi-weekly publication with subscribers in many parts of Canada. It even managed to absorb a couple of Hungarian language papers started in Central Canada. Within a decade-and-a-half of its founding, the *News* became one of the two viable Hungarian newspapers in Canada; the other was the *Worker*. Significantly enough, in 1941 an official of Canada's External Affairs Department described the *Worker* as the organ of Canada's Hungarian Communists, and the *News* of Winnipeg as the voice of the "Magyar-speaking refugees from the old Hungarian provinces that had been turned over to Jugoslavia (*sic*), Roumania and Czechoslovakia."⁷ Indeed, the ardent revisionism of the *News* is also noted in a study that was done on its editorial policies.⁸

It is not a mere coincidence that for much of the time under consideration in this paper the guiding spirit behind the *News*' operations was an intelligent, energetic young man, Béla Bácskai Payerle, who hailed from the region that had been transferred by the Treaty of Trianon to Yugoslavia. Other refugees from Hungary's "old provinces" made it to the leadership of other institutions. Indeed, it is hard to think of any Hungarian-Canadian leader of the 1920s immigration stream who did not have close personal ties to one or more of the provinces detached from Hungary. Some of the leaders of the Canadian Hungarian Federation were from this group of refugees; so were several of the most influential Hungarian-Canadian religious leaders of this period.⁹

The single most important characteristic of Hungarian immigrant politics in Ontario during the Depression then, was division along ideological lines. The split permeated all levels of the Hungarian community down to local social clubs and benevolent organizations. The ardent patriotism of the "patriotic right" was reinforced by official propaganda emanating from Hungary, while the left was feeding on Communist propaganda and on the miseries of the Depression. Only the passing of the economic crisis and the passage of time would reduce the problems that the acute ideological strife was causing for the Hungarian community of the Province.

The War Years, 1939-45

For Ontario's Hungarians the Second World War brought new difficulties, anxieties, and also, new opportunities. Since Hungary did not get involved in the war until 1941, Hungarians in Canada were not seriously affected during the first two years of the war. Late in 1941 Canada declared war on Hungary, and the legal position of Hungarians in this country changed. Luckily for them, the Canadian government assumed a generous attitude toward enemy aliens (and recently naturalized immigrants) from certain Axis satellite countries as a result of which Hungarians were not placed under the same restrictions as most other enemy aliens in the country. The last several months of the war were perhaps the most traumatic for the Hungarian community of Ontario, as news of tragic developments in the "o'country" preoccupied almost everyone.

During the late-1930s, few Hungarians in Ontario were aware of the dangers that lurked behind the international developments of the times. As Canadian residents they felt to be at a safe distance from the trouble-spots of the world. As natives of Hungary they believed that a re-arrangement of the international order in Central Europe would probably benefit their mother country. Indeed, each of the crises experienced by Czechoslovakia in 1938 and 1939 resulted in territorial adjustments in favour of Hungary. The vast majority of Hungarians, in Ontario and elsewhere, could only applaud the return of "ancient Hungarian lands" (populated mainly by Hungarians), to Hungary. That these changes exacerbated a nationality problem in Hungary (especially in the case of a small but influential and vociferous German minority), and tended to draw the country closer into the Axis orbit, was realized only by a few Hungarians at the time.

When the war broke out in the late summer of 1939, most Hungarians in Ontario knew where their loyalty lay. With their country of adoption at war with Germany, and their original homeland still firmly neutral, they were not troubled by a case of divided loyalties. Only Hungarians under Communist influence were supposed to oppose the "imperialist war." Yet, neither the patriotic nor the leftist Hungarians suffered much or had reason to worry a great deal in this period. The former were left alone as long as Hungary was not officially aligned with the Axis powers, while the latter suffered only to the extent that their leading organs were watched by the government. No Hungarian played a major role in the Communist Party of Canada and we are not aware of any from Ontario who were interned by Canadian authorities as opponents of the war effort.¹⁰

This situation changed gradually as a result of international developments in 1941. The German invasion of the Soviet Union resulted in the U.S.S.R. becoming a member of the alliance against the Axis, an event that led to a gradual relaxation of the restrictions on Communists in Canada. Once bureaucratic inertia was overcome, leftist leaders were released from internment camps and their organizations (often in the guise of non-Communist but "progressive" causes), regained their previous political influence, or became more powerful than ever before. In the meantime, the position of the patriotic Hungarians deteriorated.

The root cause of this latter development was Hungary's involvement in the Second World War in June of 1941. Late in that month Hungarian targets were bombed by planes whose identity is still being disputed.¹¹ The Hungarian government of the time accused Russia of perpetrating the raids and declared the existence of a state of war between Hungary and the U.S.S.R. The country's involvement in the war did not bring an immediate declaration of war on her by Britain and her allies. But as the alliance between the British and the Soviets was formalized, the latter brought pressure on the former to produce a declaration of war against all of Russia's enemies, especially Finland and Hungary. This pressure in turn resulted in the British government asking the Dominions to follow the British lead.

The request from London was first discussed by the Canadian War Cabinet on the 29th of October. Prime Minister W.L.M. King was not ready, as yet, to call for a declaration of war. "Considerable numbers of Finns and Hungarians," he explained to his colleagues, "engaged in essential industries in Canada... would be adversely affected by a declaration of war."¹² In light of the Prime Minister's views, the War Cabinet decided not to comply with the British request for the time being.

A month later the issue returned to the agenda of the Canadian government. The news came from London that the British government had resolved to act on the matter, and that it had sent ultimatums to Finland and Hungary (as well as Rumania), demanding that they cease hostilities against the Soviet Union. On this occasion the Canadian War Cabinet decided to follow the British example.¹³

The onset of an official state of war between Canada and Hungary on December 6, might easily have resulted in most Hungarians in Canada becoming "enemy aliens" and being treated the same way as Germans and Italians were, and Japanese would be in a few weeks. This would have meant internment at worst, and at best, restriction

of basic rights (monthly report to the police, the need to carry identification documents, restrictions on travel etc.) in most cases. Fortunately for Hungarians, their lot as “enemy aliens” was not to be the same as that of the Germans, Italians, etc.

The question of the treatment of enemy nationals and immigrants from Axis satellite countries came up before the Canadian government at the time the issue of war with Finland and Hungary was discussed. At the end of November, 1941, Norman Robertson, one of Canada’s most influential civil servants, explained that in the “event of war” a distinction should be made between Finnish (and Hungarian) and “other enemy aliens.”¹⁴ Although it was known to the Canadian government that the British leaders were not planning to treat their Finns, Hungarians etc. differently from Germans and Italians, the Cabinet in Ottawa decided to exempt these people from many of the disabilities imposed on Germans and Italians. Prime Minister King argued: “Most of these people were law-abiding, well disposed and loyal inhabitants of Canada, contributing to its war effort and disavowing any allegiance to the Nazi controlled governments of their countries of origin.”¹⁵

Even after the Canadian declaration of war on Hungary, Hungarians in Ontario (in fact, in all of Canada), were allowed to continue their daily lives in peace. This is not to say that they did not suffer from anti-Axis prejudices of the Canadian population. These anti-foreigner feelings were strong during the war and resulted in the dismissal of many people with German, Italian and other “enemy alien” names or accents from their jobs, and their non-hiring by other employers. As these sentiments were directed mainly against Germans and Japanese, however, Hungarians tended to be less affected by them.

To counter the effects of such discrimination, and in order to gain the support of immigrant ethnic groups for the Canadian war effort, the government in Ottawa embarked on an ambitious and novel venture: direct dialogue with such minorities as the Hungarian. These new policies had their immediate origins in the establishment, in July of 1940, of the Department of National War Services. In 1941 a few people inside this new ministry, and several outside of it, began working toward the creation of an office within the Canadian government service whose task it would be to keep in touch with the country’s immigrant ethnic groups. The idea was supported by the first Minister of National War Services, James G. Gardiner. His successor in that office, Joseph T. Thorson, an Icelandic-Canadian, also worked toward this same end, but the most effective promoter of it was one of his deputies, Judge Thomas

Davis, a Westerner who developed his sympathy toward immigrants during his many years of public service in Saskatchewan. In the Cabinet the idea was supported by still another Westerner, Thomas A. Crerar, who as Minister of Mines and Resources was in charge of Canadian immigration policy and relations with immigrant groups.

As a result of the work of these and other men, late in 1941 a bureau was created within the Department of National War Services. It was to be known until the end of the war as the Nationalities Branch. To provide advice to it, the government established the Committee on Co-operation in Canadian Citizenship (C.C.C.C.). The Committee consisted of prominent public figures and academics knowledgeable about ethnic affairs in Canada. One of its most influential members was Watson Kirkconnell, a noted poet, teacher, verse translator and publicist. The head of the Nationalities Branch was an Englishman by the name of Tracy Philipps who had come to Canada to promote the allied war effort among Eastern European immigrants to this country. Kirkconnell and Philipps became close friends and collaborators.¹⁶ Between the two of them they spoke (or at least read) just about every language spoken by Canada's East and Central European immigrants.

One of the projects undertaken by the Nationalities Branch was the hiring of a few individuals to undertake what might be called "missions" to a few ethnic groups. One of these was to be the Hungarian. The aim of these missions was to establish a dialogue between the government and the leaders and members of the group, to promote the Canadian war effort, to assure immigrants of the government's good will toward them and, if possible, unite these groups under leaders loyal to the Canadian government.

The government's 1942 mission to the Hungarian-Canadian community was entrusted primarily to a Hungarian resident of Montreal, Béla Eisner. Though the undertaking failed in its most practical objectives, it was perhaps the most effective of all the missions undertaken at the time. Both the successes and the failures of the mission derived to some extent from Eisner's character. A hard and conscientious worker, Eisner threw himself into work with a great deal of determination. But his drive and ambition no doubt contributed to the negative reaction he encountered among Hungarians in many places.¹⁷

One of the most memorable episodes of Eisner's mission was his tour of the Hungarian communities of southern and northern Ontario. Eisner undertook this tour after informing Hungarian-Canadian leaders and newspapermen of the government's aims in regard to immigrant groups. Next, he announced to these people

his plans to visit them in their own communities. The visits were not without their difficulties. Both community leaders and ordinary immigrants were often too busy to help Eisner in his efforts. Many of them were on shift work, or were putting in overtime (a fact which illustrates how greatly the employment situation had improved for immigrants since the 1930s). Another blow to Eisner's campaign came when the Hungarian communists came out against him, and denounced him and his Ottawa backers with full vigour. Even those ethnic leaders who were impressed with the importance of Eisner's aims often developed second thoughts about the matter once the visitor left their city. Only in a few localities did the various Hungarian immigrant organizations unite as a result of Eisner's proddings.¹⁸ The establishment of a national umbrella organization for Hungarians in Canada continued to elude this group despite the efforts of Eisner and his backers.

Eisner wrote a detailed report on his visits to Ontario's Hungarian centres. This report paints a very different picture of life in these communities than that which had prevailed there during the Great Depression. Now, factories were operating full-steam and most workers could put in as much overtime as they wanted. People were taking advantage of the economic opportunities partly in order to make up for wages lost during the 1930s, and partly out of fear that at the end of the war employment opportunities would decline once again. The same fear was driving Hungarians into unions, the expectation being that unions would insist on the seniority principle when it came to lay-offs, and immigrant workers with many years of employment behind them would not be fired in order to make room for native-born persons.¹⁹

Eisner's report said little about Hungarian ethnic life in Toronto. The organization of a united Hungarian co-ordinating committee in that city had been entrusted not to Eisner, but to a local resident, Nicholas Hornyanszky, a noted artist. Although the latter's efforts came to nought in 1942, in the following year Toronto's Hungarian community, in part under Hornyanszky's leadership, succeeded in buying a Hungarian House on the edge of the city's "Little Hungary" (roughly, Toronto's Chinatown of recent years). In a few years the building proved too small, and a larger property was purchased nearby, on College Street near Spadina Avenue. This new building would serve Toronto's Hungarian community until the establishment of the present-day Hungarian-Canadian Cultural Centre on St. Clair Ave. West during the early 1970s.²⁰

The national unity that had eluded Hungarian organizational life during the 1930s and the early war years would at last be attained,

even if only temporarily, during the closing years of the war. Two developments made this possible. One was a series of dramatic events in Hungary, starting with a German military occupation of the country in March of 1944 and ending with its capture, after months of bitter fighting, by the Red Army a little more than a year later. The other development was more complex and subtle. It was the increased respect and influence the political left gained in Canadian public life in 1943 and 1944. Indeed, the creation of wartime unity in Hungarian public life in the last two years of the war was achieved through the participation of the left.

The campaign to unite Hungarian-Canadians had its origins in the call of one Hungarian newspaperman for the collection of money for relief supplies for war-torn Hungary. The call was made in June of 1944, but it was not embraced by the Hungarian community as a whole until the end of the war. In April of 1945 however, a Canada-wide campaign was started with the backing of most of the important Hungarian-Canadian organizations. In August of the same year a congress was held in Hamilton, at which a united umbrella organization was established to spearhead the relief effort. In the resulting "Committee" representatives of the Hungarian-Canadian left sat side-by-side with those of the group's Catholic and Protestant congregations. The campaign continued with reasonable success until the middle of 1947 when dissension between the right and the left led to its demise.²¹ Within a few years another Hungarian-Canadian umbrella organization would rise on the ruins of its war-time predecessor. But its story belongs to another phase of Hungarian history in Ontario (where it was to happen) and will be discussed later.

Institutional and Social Developments, 1939-45

During the Second World War Toronto emerged as one of the most important centres of Hungarian-Canadian life not only in Ontario but in the whole of Canada. It is not surprising that this development brought a flowering of organized Hungarian religious life in that city. Progress was made, for example, in the life of Toronto's young Hungarian Roman Catholic parish. In 1939, the parish received a new priest in the person of Leo J. Austin. Father Austin was to guide the church during the war and the immediate post-war period. The most important event during his tenure was the purchase of a house of worship by the Hungarian Catholic community of Toronto. It was located at the corner of Dundas Street

and Spadina Avenue, close to the city's main Hungarian residential area. The down payment on the building was collected through a fundraising campaign and a "matching" donation from the Roman Catholic diocese of Toronto. An almost equally important event in the war-time evolution of the parish was the arrival from Saskatchewan of a few Hungarian members of the order of Roman Catholic nuns known as the Sisters of Social Service.²²

The work of the Roman Catholics in Toronto served as inspiration to their co-religionists elsewhere. In Hamilton, for example, a movement was started for the establishment of a distinct Hungarian parish. After some opposition by the local Catholic leadership, the efforts of Hamilton's Hungarians were crowned by success. A few years after the war, they were also successful in acquiring a church building of their own.²³

Most Protestant congregations continued their development much as they had before the war. Yet both they and the Catholic ones were plagued by problems, the most serious of which was the lack of adequate number of priests and ministers. As there was no immigration from Hungary, the recruitment of men of the cloth became next to impossible. Second generation Hungarian Canadians found the idea of serving ethnic churches unattractive. Consequently, new Hungarian congregations often had to make do with non-Hungarian priests, or in the case of the Protestant ones, with visiting ministers or missionaries from other parts of the province. In the meantime, the weekend and Sunday schools associated with the ethnic churches were also plagued with the problems of declining enrollment and the dearth of qualified volunteer teachers. Part of the problem was Ontario's new wartime prosperity: most people were so busy working that they had little time to devote to the "ethnic" education of their children.²⁴

Indeed, there is evidence that the improvement in the economic situation of the Hungarian community of Ontario in some respects contributed to the weakening of its ethnic solidarity. Most importantly, the new prosperity contributed to the community's increased economic and social stratification. As some families became more prosperous than others, their outlook on life and even their lifestyles became different. For example, the little wealth that some families accumulated enabled them to leave the "ethnic neighbourhood" and to buy houses in better districts. In Toronto, for example, during the war more and more Hungarians left "Little Hungary" south of College Street, and bought houses in the more prestigious Madison Avenue – Huron Street area north of Bloor Street.²⁵

The increased economic and therefore social stratification of

Ontario's Hungarian community probably reinforced the process of assimilation that every immigrant community in Canada sooner or later undergoes. As the majority, even perhaps the vast majority of Hungarians in the province were people who came here as young adults in the second half of the 1920s and the early years of the Depression, it can be said that Hungarian-Ontarians had reached middle age during the war. Their children were growing up and leaving the family nest. They had been brought up in a Canadian environment and tended to assume Canadian lifestyles as soon as they got married and set up their own housekeeping. This was especially true of children who married outside their ethnic group. With these processes going on, it was only question of time that a visible, viable and identifiable Hungarian ethnic life would disappear in the province. What prevented this from happening was a series of postwar developments, more precisely, the coming of two new waves of Hungarian immigrants to Canada, and especially to Ontario.