

Hungarian Minority Education in Czechoslovakia: A Struggle for Ethnic Survival

Karoly Nagy

Most of Czechoslovakia's 579,600 Hungarians live in Slovakia.¹ 1,084,000 Hungarians were annexed there without their consent after the 1920 Treaty of Trianon. According to 1980 census data, in 451 Slovak towns Hungarians still constitute the majority of the population.²

Slovakia's Hungarians are subjected to a political, economic, social, and cultural existence of double jeopardy. On the one hand they are deprived of a democratic life with guaranteed human rights and freedoms. They are, like all citizens of the country, ruled by a communist one-party dictatorship. On the other hand Hungarians are also subjected to additional pressures, discrimination, and deprivations, resulting from governmental policies of denationalization, of forced assimilation.³

Nowhere is this policy more flagrant and damaging than in the educational sector, which, next to the family, is the most important institution of language and culture preservation. School closings, discontinuation of Hungarian language use and instruction, political-social pressures on parents to enroll their children in Slovak-language schools, all add up to a dangerously diminishing opportunity for ethno-cultural continuity. School enrollment statistics show that, besides studying the Slovak language which is compulsory in all schools, the chances for Hungarian and other national minority students to receive instruction in their own language is steadily diminishing. An example: in the 1977–78 school year 76 percent of all Hungarian students attended Hungarian elementary, high and vocational high schools and Slovak schools which offer at least some Hungarian instruction. Five years later, in the 1982–83 school year, this ratio decreased to 72 percent, or 62.5 percent, if we add the ratio of industrial schools.⁴ It should be added that in the past thirty-eight years the government has eliminated 340 Hungarian elementary schools in Slovakia.⁵ It has also completely discontinued the higher education programmes in Hungarian teacher training.

Throughout his life, Oszkár Jászi (known to North American audiences as Oscar Jaszi), the turn-of-the-century Hungarian scholar and publicist, consistently argued and struggled for the rights of the national minorities.⁶ He leveled his strongest criticism against the forced assimilation practices of his own Hungarian government and society at the beginning of the century, upholding ethnic autonomy as the only humane, democratic and practically, even politically viable principle. He wrote in 1911: "There exists a universal, minimal national minorities programme, common to all national minority questions of the world, without the solution of which nowhere in the world was it ever possible to achieve peace, order and cooperation. This programme can be succinctly summarized thus: . . . good schools, good government administration and good jurisdiction which can be good only if offered in the people's own language."⁷ Jászi was a socialist, but he also recognized that international solidarity is not possible without recognizing the importance of national or ethnic identity first. He wrote: "Mankind is made such that there is only one road leading to internationalism: the one through national existence. There is no other cultural recipe possible."⁸ In his 1926–28 monumental work about the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy he also bemoaned the fact that the new rulers of the dismembered Monarchy's successor states continued the inhuman forced assimilation policies which had been the chief obstacles to Central European cooperation in the past.⁹ He wrote: "We can witness that the same policies which gave a pretext for dismembering Hungary are now practiced by the former victims of that policy."¹⁰ "The new ruling nations, in some places, are practicing the same political and cultural methods, which were used before the war by the Germans, the Hungarians and the Poles to maintain their hegemony over the people they ruled." "Some of the victorious people did not learn from the tragic fate of the Habsburg Empire and most of these old methods live on in education as well as in administrative life. Excesses of the most flagrant nationalistic fever are poisoning the air in some places."¹¹

After the Second World War the peace treaties again thrust all the Hungarians in Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, Rumania and Yugoslavia into minority status. With the possible exception of the latter country, the communist one-party governments demonstrated more continuity than discontinuity during the past forty years with regard to discrimination against the Hungarian minorities. What Jászi observed in 1928, still applies today: some of the victorious people did not learn from old mistakes, most of the old forced-assimilation methods are still practiced in education as well as in administrative life, excesses of the most flagrant nationalism are poisoning the air in some places. To be sure, Jászi did not have any illusions about

anticipating democratic humanism of the new “socialist” ruling model. After visiting Hungary in 1948, on the eve of the Communist Party’s total take-over there with the support of the Soviet occupying forces, he bemoaned the fact that “the increasingly permeating atmosphere is that of Eastern totalitarianism and the omnipotent state” “copying Russian dictatorship in every essential aspect.”¹² He argued that “Austrian absolutism and the Nazis were annihilated in vain if the country submits itself now to a new, ruthless imperialism.”¹³

Subsequent events have proved Jászi’s forebodings all too correct, and not only for Hungary: totalitarian dictatorships suffocated the Soviet-dominated regions of Europe for about a decade to come. And, although after violent upheavals of protest in East Germany and Poland, after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and the “Prague Spring” of 1968, economic reforms and a semblance of democratization have achieved some movement from totalitarianism towards authoritarianism in Hungary, Czechoslovakia is still suffering from a very predominantly anti-democratic dictatorship in all spheres of life and Rumania’s population is completely subjugated by a totalitarian police state. It is in these latter two countries that minorities—Hungarian, German, Ukrainian, Jewish, and others—suffer from the most persistent and systematic discrimination, described by some as European Apartheid, cultural genocide, or ethnocide.

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During the night of May 10, 1984, Dr. Miklós Duray was arrested for the second time in Bratislava (Pozsony), Slovakia’s capital city, where he works as a geologist.¹⁴ He was charged by the police under sections 112 and 199 of the criminal code, i.e.: “perpetrating activities damaging to the external interests of the Republic” and “propagating false, inciting rumors”—charges usually leveled against political dissidents there—punishable with a maximum penalty of three years and six months respectively. Dr. Duray was imprisoned in solitary confinement, he was not permitted even to see a lawyer, or a visitor. On September 29, the police dropped the two charges and submitted a new indictment against him, this time: Section 98 of the penal code: i.e.: “subversion,” which carries a penalty of one to five years imprisonment, but, if committed with the aid of a foreign power, three to ten years. Later, he was granted permission to be visited by his wife during Christmas and on two other occasions, and they placed him in a cell with others. On May 10, 1985, at 12:30 p.m. he was released under the terms of a limited amnesty, with all charges withdrawn.

What did Dr. Duray in fact do to deserve to be imprisoned for 470 days from November 10, 1982 to February 22, 1983 and from May 10, 1984 to May 10, 1985?

Miklós Duray was born on July 18, 1945, in Losonc (Lucenec). He describes, in his autobiographical work: *Kutyaszorító*¹⁵, how he began, as a student in the 1960's, to participate in political life, in Hungarian student clubs and associations. He became one of the leading organizers of the Hungarian democratic youth movement in Slovakia. The movement and its leaders suffered from increasing political and police pressures until, finally, they could no longer continue their functions. He became keenly aware, during his years as a student activist, that Hungarians and other national minorities suffer discrimination in all walks of life. The official anti-minority policies and practices are fanned and made worse by Slovak anti-Hungarian nationalism which, like racism and anti-Semitism of other times and places, permeates the entire social fabric.

During the spring of 1978, alarming news of a comprehensive governmental policy plan reached some Hungarian minority circles in Slovakia about "educational reorganization." According to the plans, from the fall of 1978 the language of instruction was to be changed in all Hungarian schools to Slovak, in all classes above the fifth grade, with the exception of four subjects: Hungarian grammar and literature, geography and history. This would have meant that the Hungarian schools would have become Slovak schools with only some subjects taught in Hungarian.

A sharp protest by a substantial number of concerned Hungarians made the government postpone the plans for a few months. It was during this year that, as one of the acts of protest, Miklós Duray and others, founded the "Committee for the Defense of the Rights of the Hungarian Minority in Czechoslovakia" (Csehszlovákiai Magyar Kisebbség Jogvédő Bizottsága). The Committee began to conduct a clandestine information and protest campaign. In November of 1978 the government's Department of Education, jointly with the Slovak Communist Party's Central Committee, officially revealed their "educational reorganization" plan, a version of the previously tabled programme. This time the popular protest was even more vigorous and widespread than before. Even the governmental "Nationality Secretariat" and the officially approved—and controlled—Hungarian cultural organization, the CSEMADOK (Csehszlovákiai Magyar Dolgozók Kultúregyesülete, i.e. Czechoslovak Hungarian Workers' Cultural Association) officially registered their disapproval.

The Committee for the Defence of the Rights of the Hungarian Minority in Czechoslovakia (CDRHMC) managed to intensify its activities. Their letters reached many thousands of citizens, and they succeeded in smuggling their memoranda, situation reports and documents to Hungary as well as to Austria, France, West Germany and the United States, where they received increasing publicity. They sent petitions to the Czechoslovak government, letters to the leaders of Charter 77—the dissident group of Czechoslovak intellectuals (of which Duray is a member)—and presented

a detailed memorandum to the 1980–81 Madrid Review Conference of the Helsinki Agreement (the 1975 Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe), and in 1981, a comprehensive documentary study to the London Minority Rights Group. All of these were published in a number of languages in Western countries. The police reacted by increased harassment of the group with repeated house searches, interrogations, and surveillance, and by the arrest of Miklós Duray on November 10, 1982,

An international campaign of protest ensued. Government officials, writers (including Irving Howe, Susan Sontag and Kurt Vonnegut) newspapers, organizations (Amnesty International, Helsinki Watch, the Hungarian Human Rights Foundation and many others—in Europe and in the United States), demanded Duray’s release. There were also rumours of meetings, even negotiations between some of Hungary’s and Czechoslovakia’s party and government officials, but there were no Hungarian governmental public statements made then, either about Duray’s arrest, or about any other acts of discrimination against the Hungarian national minorities in East Central Europe. At the time there was no discernible official Hungarian policy in existence on this issue. Apparently, the Hungarian government of the time was not aware of Jászi’s admonition, made after the 1920 dismemberment of Hungary, that the country’s subsequent policy must “demand with uncompromising intransigence that Hungarians not only be citizens with equal rights within their new states, but that they can stay Hungarians in their language and culture, in full undisturbed spiritual contact with the 7–8 million Hungarians left in the old motherland.”¹⁶ After a two-day trial, on January 31 and February 1 of 1983, Duray was released but the charges against him were not withdrawn.

The government’s campaign to liquidate Hungarian schools continued. Between February and November of 1983, two versions of governmental legislative proposal were revealed. The November 25 version—Resolution 345, clause 32a—contained two paragraphs which, in effect, aimed at providing legal foundations for the elimination of Hungarian, German, Polish, and Ukrainian minority language schools. It stated: [in paragraph 4] “The Ministry of Education can authorize some subjects to be taught in the Slovak or Czech language in the nationality-language schools if the locally responsible national committees, based on agreement with the students’ parents, submit proposals to this effect.” And [in paragraph 5] “The Ministry of Education can decree some definite subjects in some schools to be taught in other than the schools’ language of instruction.” All citizens, ruled by dictatorial governments, know what phrases, like “based on agreement with the students’ parents” really mean. In actual practice they give license—even an instruction—to local party and government officials to “obtain” such “agreements” from the parents by all the means that the local powers control. And they do control virtually all the means: jobs,

income, housing, travel, health, children's school admissions and grandparents' retirement pensions, just to mention some of the most obvious ones. Pressures on parents to discontinue the maintenance of their minority language and culture have been systematically applied all along—the present legislation would have legalized, expanded, and accelerated the denationalization programme with the force of law.

CDRHMS again organized a protest campaign. Miklós Duray wrote a letter to President Gustav Husak, dated February 12, 1984, pointing out that the proposed legislation is unconstitutional, because the 1960 Constitution and 1968 Constitutional Law Concerning the Nationalities, guaranteed the right of the country's national minorities to maintain their schools and to develop their cultures in their own languages. During the early spring of 1984, more than ten thousand citizens from all walks of life wrote letters of protest to various governmental and party forums. Again, the protests were partly successful.

The Slovak National Council's April 2, 1984, session enacted the Governmental legislative proposal except for paragraphs 4 and 5. What limited the protesters' success was a statement of the Minister of Education, Juraj Busa, which declared that the excluded paragraphs would be put in effect by Ministry ordinances.

On May 10 Duray was again arrested. This time an even more widespread international protest ensued. This activity must have been at least partly responsible for his release, with amnesty, on May 10, 1985. Hungarian and non-Hungarian writers, intellectuals, politicians, organizations and individuals in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Rumania, in Western Europe, the Americas, even in Australia and Japan, wrote thousands of letters, made official statements, publicized their indignation, demanding Duray's immediate release. In a letter after his release, thanking everyone for their actions and expressions of solidarity, Duray wrote: "International support and help was effective not only to me, personally, but even more to the cause of minority rights which must be part of the conscience of international politics."¹⁷

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The historically consistent cause-and-effect relationship which exists between political democracy and opportunities for minority culture maintenance is evident in the case of the Hungarians in Czechoslovakia. The fate of Hungarian language and culture there depends, to a large extent, on whether or not Czechoslovakia will be able to democratize its society.

The struggle of Hungarians for cultural survival in Slovakia is a democratic movement. Its practices and expressions emphasize constitutionally

guaranteed legal rights, freedom of choice, of information, of expression, of conscience. In fact, the movement attempts to translate the formally pronounced legal rights to actual practices, thus it strives for the democratization of society at large.

No actions or pronouncements bear any signs of chauvinism on the part of the Hungarians struggling for national survival in Slovakia. They do not seem to answer anti-Hungarian nationalism with counter-nationalism. In fact, they always emphasize equal regard and equal rights for both majority and minority groups. This stance might have been one of the reasons that prompted a number of leading Czechoslovak intellectuals to write open letters to their government demanding Duray's release. The Hungarian minority leaders base their struggle on the principles of self-determination. And as Hungarian thinker István Bibó asserted in 1972: "The principle of self-determination. . . , when taken seriously and applied in practice, is the only realistic antidote to states and complexes of superiority, of subjugation and of fear, which give birth to nationalism."¹⁸

The role of the Hungarian government regarding the case of Duray was that of a woefully unfulfilled historical responsibility. When citizens in dozens of countries raised their voices demanding the fulfillment of basic human rights for oppressed Hungarian minorities, Hungary's government remained silent. An example of this malign neglect: no Hungarian embassy or consulate in any country has any information in any language about the Hungarian minorities, in spite of the fact that about one third of the approximately 16 million Hungarians of the world live outside of Hungary's present borders.

Sustained international awareness and readiness for active support does seem to help human life and human rights efforts of groups and individuals in a world community of increased communication capabilities, increasing interdependence and growing nuclear danger. Hunger in Ethiopia, Apartheid in South Africa, the oppression of the Hungarian minorities in East Central Europe, terrorism in the Middle East and Latin America, suppression of the Solidarity movement in Poland, affects us all, therefore is the responsibility of us all. We need to increase our will, ways, and means of fulfilling our responsibility.

Notes

- 1 Official census data are usually unreliable. According to reliable estimates, Czechoslovakia's Hungarian population is between 600,000 and 700,000.
- 2 Juraj Zvara: *Nemzet, nemzetiség, nemzeti tudat* [Nation, nationality, national consciousness] (Bratislava, 1985), p. 138.
- 3 For recent documentation of these policies and practices, see: Kálmán Janics: *Czechoslovak Policy and the Hungarian Minority* (New York: Social Science Monographs, Columbia University Press, 1982), and János Ölvedi, *Napfogvat-*

- kozás* [Eclipse], (New York: Püski, 1985).
- 4 *Szlovákiai jelentés a magyar kisebbség állapotáról* [Slovakian report on the state of the Hungarian minority], (Paris: Magyar Füzetek Könyvei 4, 1982), p. 42; and Zvara, pp. 192f.
 - 5 *Szlovákiai jelentés*, p. 34; and Zvara, pp. 98 and 192–93. For 1988 data see: *Új Szó* (Bratislava) 25 Feb. 1988, and *Magyar Nemzet* (Budapest), 4 April 1988.
 - 6 For the historical literature on Jászi see note 10 of this volume's introductory essay.
 - 7 György Litván and János F. Varga eds., *Jászi Oszkár publicisztikája* (Budapest: Magvető, 1982.), p. 158.
 - 8 *Ibid.*, p. 172.
 - 9 Oszkár Jászi, "Miért nem sikerült a Dunavölgyi Federációt megalkotni" [Why the creation of a Danubian Federation did not succeed], *Látóhatár* (Munich, 1953), pp. 1f.
 - 10 Oszkár Jászi, *A Habsburg-monarchia felbomlása* [The dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy] (Budapest: Gondolat, 1983), p. 422.
 - 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 559–60.
 - 12 Oszkár Jászi, *Marxizmus vagy liberalizmus* (Paris: Magyar Füzetek Könyvei 6, 1983), pp. 211–212.
 - 13 *Ibid.*
 - 14 Data in this section, unless noted otherwise, were derived from personal sources and from: *In Defense of Hungarian Schools in Slovakia: Documents*, (New York: Hungarian Human Rights Foundation, 1984).
 - 15 Miklós Duray, *Kutyaszoritó* [fig.: being in a quagmire], (New York: Püski, 1983).
 - 16 Oszkár Jászi, *Magyar kálvária, magyar feltámadás* [Hungarian calvary, Hungarian resurrection] (Munich: Aurora, 1969), pp. 170f.
 - 17 "Duray Miklós levele" [A letter by Miklós Duray], *Nyugati Magyarság* [Hungarians of the West] (Calgary, Alberta), September, 1985.
 - 18 István Bibó: "The Principle of Self-determination," in *Democracy, Revolution, Self-determination—Selected Writings* (New York: Atlantic Research and Social Science Monographs, forthcoming).

APPENDIX

Table 1.

Number of Hungarian elementary schools in Slovakia, 1950–1988

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of Hungarian Elementary Schools</i>
1950	609
1970	490
1982	295
1985	277
1988	269

Table 2.

Hungarian Students Receiving all
or Some Hungarian and only Slovak Instruction

School Type	Percent of Hungarian Students Receiving all or some Hungarian Instruction		Percent of Hungarian Students in Schools Offering only Slovak Instruction	
	<i>1977–78</i>	<i>1982–83</i>	<i>1977–78</i>	<i>1982–83</i>
Elementary	79	76	21	24
High	83	75	17	25
Vocational High	67	64	33	36
Industrial	n.a.	35	n.a.	65
Total:	76	62.5	24	37.5