

Hungarian Chair at the University of Toronto: A Decennial Report

George Bisztray

Until recently it was but an unsubstantiated claim that many members of the Hungarian immigration to Canada after World War II prospered in this country. A few case studies in support of this claim have appeared in the local Hungarian press, or in individual publications.¹ Yet, it was only recently, when Oliver Botar's photohistorical exhibition: "Hungarians in Canada" was compiled,² that the immense contribution of Hungarian talent to Canada's development was convincingly documented.

No visual representation can demonstrate the evolution of the Hungarian-Canadian mentality during the past decades. Acculturation, the zeal of many first-generation and most second-generation Hungarian-Canadians to "make it," appeared to be counterproductive to cultural retention. N.F. Dreisziger is one of the few who did discuss Hungarian immigrant psyche, stating that, "the enculturation of second-generation Hungarians into the ethnic subculture has become virtually impossible."³ The fear of losing a whole generation, especially when they entered university, and the justified embarrassment that teaching and research on Hungarian culture may not gain valid representation within the wider Canadian academic framework, troubled some members of the Hungarian-Canadian community.

Initial attempts to introduce university courses on Hungarian language, literature, history and the cultural value of these disciplines began in the 1960s,⁴ resulting only in half-measures or temporary solutions (such as courses offered on an annual basis). Without permanent funding, Hungarian courses were at the mercy of university administrators. No university showed a willingness to integrate Hungarian into its curriculum. According to statistics from the early 1970s, Slovak language and literature were taught at seven Canadian universities, Latvian at six, the diverse languages of India at five and Hungarian at none.⁵

It was the Széchenyi Society, a Calgary-based, Hungarian Canadian cul-

tural association, that assumed the task of working for the establishment of a university chair in Hungarian Studies. It was this same Society that had initiated efforts to introduce various Hungarian university courses in the 1960s. While the Society's stated "Purposes and Objectives," at the time of its incorporation in 1965, did not specifically include the establishment of a university chair, this became the Széchenyi Society's actual primary objective after just a few years. With a membership of 1,000 and contributions in the thousands of dollars at the time of its founding, this devoted and efficiently organized society seemed eminently prepared for the ambitious task of making Hungarian Studies a part of Canadian academe. In the early 1970s, the idea of an endowment fund was conceived to secure the continuous operation of such a chair. The choice of location was obvious: the University of Toronto, Canada's most prestigious institution of higher learning, situated in a city with the largest Hungarian community in the country.

Early in 1973, the Society hired a community consulting firm, Adrian D. Berry & Associates (Calgary). In the last week of April, Mr. Berry went to Toronto to meet with representatives of the university and presented them with the Society's "Brief" to open negotiations. The detailed report he sent to the Society following negotiations revolved around the necessary funds ("rather high figures"); the earliest possible date to begin the Chair's activity (the fall of 1975); and the considerable interest in the idea found among students and the community.⁶

The Széchenyi Society pursued further consultations with the university in May, in the course of which the university specified the amount expected to administer the Chair: it was set at \$500,000. The National Steering Committee of the planned Hungarian Cultural Studies Appeal was formed in August under the chairmanship of A.D. Berry. A federal conference held in Ottawa on October 14–16 was attended, at the government's invitation, by Leslie Duska, chairman of the Széchenyi Society, A.D. Berry and Toronto lawyer Frank Felkai. On October 15 the conference accepted as a resolution Mr. Duska's proposal that the federal government match the amount of funds raised by any ethnic group to establish a university chair. The Society held public orientation meetings in Toronto on October 13, with the University of Toronto's provost and the Honourable J.W. Pickersgill, Canada's Minister of Immigration in 1956–57, as guests; in Montreal on October 16; and in Winnipeg on October 17. Officers of the local steering committees were nominated, and a number of questions answered.⁷

Actual fundraising began in April 1974, after a full year of preparations. In the meantime, the Society's association with the outside consultants ceased, and Mr. Berry's name disappeared from further communications. The letterhead of the Hungarian-Canadian Cultural Studies Appeal listed Leslie Duska as Chairman, Andrew Farkas as Vice-Chairman, Tibor Fekete

as Treasurer and Martin Kovacs as Campaign Administrator of the National Campaign Committee.

To accompany the launch of the fundraising campaign, a number of fliers were produced to promote the cause. They defined the purpose of the campaign thus: "to make available and maintain in Canada, for the benefit of all Canadians . . . gems of Hungarian culture—literature, language, music, art, history. . . ." (Significantly, "history" appeared first in the Hungarian translation.) Its primary objective was "to establish and provide a permanent endowment for a Chair in Hungarian Cultural Studies at the University of Toronto. . . ."

Relevant documents for the subsequent three years are scarce. It is known, however, that by the end of 1976, \$243,561 were raised, and another \$58,500 pledged.⁸ By 1977 approximately \$300,000 were collected. This was the year the campaign chairman took Ottawa at its word. On December 21, 1977, the Minister of State for Multiculturalism approved funds matching those raised by the Széchenyi Society, bringing the endowment to \$600,000. Final arrangements with the University of Toronto began early in 1978.

The university had two decisions to make: what was to be the nature of the chair, and who should be the incumbent. With reference to the former: reacting to an intra-university communique about the establishment of the Hungarian Chair, certain members of the Department of History (now mainly retired) issued a series of memoranda and letters protesting the faintest suggestion that the Chair be involved in the teaching of Hungarian history. The first such communication was dated January 13, the last one April 10, 1978.⁹

Without a copy of the aforementioned communique, it is unclear exactly what caused their concern. One may assume that certain donors did indeed hope to establish a chair for Hungarian history at the university. It is also true that official communications left the profile of the chair undecided, entrusting the university with finding the best solution. On the other hand, the overreaction of the Department of History left the Hungarian Chair with an image that haunted it for years: that of a bureaucratically inspired initiative pushed down the faculty's throat, an absurd aberration that could not in any healthy way be integrated into the university curriculum. "Only persons . . . with a nationalistic axe to grind could have conceived the idea of a chair to teach 'the history of the Hungarian Nation'," wrote one professor. By and large, it is clear that certain members of the faculty regarded Canada's changing social reality as a threat to their privilege of defining history in one way only, albeit paternalistic and culturally biased. "In my view the University should discourage the creation of 'ethnic' chairs," wrote the department's chairman to the dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science. After such protest, it is somewhat of a mystery why the Department of History

meekly accepted the creation of a Chair of Ukrainian Studies just two years later.

By early April, the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures volunteered to accommodate the Chair, provided that it would teach Hungarian language and literature. Simultaneously, on March 28, a Trust Agreement and a Letter of Intent were signed between the Széchenyi Society and the Governing Council of the University of Toronto. On March 30, another agreement was signed between the federal government and the Széchenyi Society.¹⁰ The text of the latter will serve as basis for the following list of aims and objectives of the Hungarian Chair.

The first paragraph of the agreement between the government and the Society consisted of several clauses. The first of these obliged the university to establish an endowment fund to finance the Hungarian Chair. The university was to have “full control of the manner in which the Endowment Fund [was] to be invested and the sole right to select academic personnel . . .”; and committed itself to make the Chair operative by January 2, 1979. Activities of the Chair were intended to have an interdisciplinary and comparative character. The university was to provide the incumbent with research and publication facilities. After the first three years an interim report, after the fifth year a full evaluation report of the Chair was expected by the Society from the university. The Endowment Fund had to be audited every year. Széchenyi Society was to forward copies of the progress report, evaluation report and the annual audits to the Minister of Multiculturalism. Without the agreement of the two funding parties, the university could not change the academic profile of the Chair. The federal government matched the funds raised by the Széchenyi Society with an equal amount or \$300,000, whichever was less.

Most of the Agreement and Letter of Intent signed by the university and Széchenyi Society coincided with the above. But the date set for the full-scale activation of the Chair differed in this Agreement from that listed in the Society’s accord with the government—September 30, 1978. The Society and the university also established an advisory committee “to actively foster the further development of Hungarian Studies in relation to the Program.” In the Letter of Intent, the first staff appointment was to be in the form of a visiting professorship, since the university needed more time “for a thorough search for a regular appointee of the chair.”

Against the uninformed expectations of certain individual donors, the Széchenyi Society consistently supported the university’s restriction that no outside interest was to interfere with the Chair’s curriculum or the selection of the incumbent.¹¹ In late April the advertisement for the open position appeared in the *Globe and Mail* and *Academic Affairs*. Applications were directed to the chairman of the Slavic Department. Interviews with three candidates were conducted in May, and the appointment was filled in early

June.

After the Hungarian Chair's first courses began in the fall, the Széchenyi Society wrapped up its fundraising campaign with a Final Campaign Report, dated October 15, 1978. Figures from this report show that Calgary and Toronto raised the most funds locally: both in excess of \$62,000. Among the provinces, Ontario (home to half of all Hungarian Canadians) was far ahead, with \$128,159 raised. It was followed by Alberta (\$75,459), Quebec (\$43,334), British Columbia (\$36,566), Manitoba (\$9,872), Saskatchewan (\$7,298) and the Maritimes (\$1,305). Contributions from abroad totalled \$20,194.

The amount raised, well in excess of the projected \$300,000, was considerable by 1978 standards. It was a clear demonstration of the belief in the need for the university Chair and the Hungarian-Canadian community's ability to foster a reasonable cause. Even the most generous contributors had agreed, though, that the campaign would never have produced any tangible results without the devotion of Leslie Duska who conceived the idea for the endowment and persuaded the federal government to support it.

Early in December 1978, the fundraisers and the university inaugurated the Hungarian Chair with a reception. Its first academic term was finished, and the Chair began to show promising results.

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Because of negotiating delays and late hiring, the Chair began its activity in a hazardous manner—by jumping in at the deep end. Its three courses were not listed in the university calendar, and the textbooks did not arrive in time for the September start of classes. In spite of this, seventeen students signed up for the courses: “Elementary Hungarian [Language],” “Hungarian Literature and Culture” and “Advanced Studies in Hungarian [Literature].”

Curriculum development took several years. In 1979–80 “Intermediate Hungarian [Language]” and “Modern Hungarian Novel,” in 1981–82 “Hungarian Drama” and “Hungarian Cinema” were introduced. In 1982–83 “Advanced Studies in Hungarian” became a descriptive and historical survey of the language, and, since 1984–85, it has been called “Advanced Language Studies.” The previous survey of literature became a new course in 1985–86, called “Survey of Hungarian Literature.”

Developing an unprecedented curriculum had its pitfalls. Between 1980–82, both elementary and intermediate language courses were offered each year. After two years it became obvious that there was no demand for such frequency. “Hungarian Literature and Culture” was offered every year

between 1979–83. It was well attended as an evening course (1979–81), but interest in the daytime class was modest, and finally withered away. Another problem with this course, which was offered in English, was the lack of relevant reading materials. Inadequate and non-existent translations made it eventually impossible to convey the reflection of Hungarian culture and history in literature to the students. The course was dropped from the curriculum in 1983.

Another experiment which was successful, but did not develop, was the introduction of non-credit Hungarian language courses at the university's School of Continuing Studies in 1984–85. The interest was obvious, even when the course was repeated in 1987–88, however, Hungarian language courses have not yet become an annual offering at Continuing Studies.

Along with curriculum development, teaching materials also had to be provided or created. In the language classes a combination of North American and Hungarian textbooks, in the novel and drama courses inexpensive Hungarian paperback editions of classics are used — the latter also available at the campus libraries. For the language and literature survey courses, textbooks have been compiled. Students in the cinema course (the only one taught in English) receive a sizable number of information handouts: for example, filmographies and a cinema glossary. In this course, initially 16mm movies were rented from local dealers. Now most of the course is based on subtitled video tapes.

Programs in Hungarian Studies (one major and two minors) were introduced in 1983. The minor programs proved especially successful.

During the first decade, Hungarian courses “reached and affected” approximately 250 students. Official university statistics, however, which add up and divide by two the student registration in one-semester courses with no account for students in continuing studies courses, register a lower number. An estimated 70 per cent of all students were of Hungarian background.

Research materials and university activities were gradually enhanced. Robarts Research Library now has approximately 20,000 volumes pertinent to Hungary. This collection is complemented by the 3,000 volumes in the Reference Library of the Hungarian Chair. This library is actually a private collection whose transportation to Canada was facilitated and financed by the World Federation of Hungarians (Magyarok Világszövetsége) and the National Széchényi Library (Országos Széchényi Könyvtár), both in Budapest. According to an educated estimate, about 80 per cent of this collection is not available elsewhere in Canada. Furthermore, twenty separate journals and periodicals are received by the Chair on a regular basis. The National Széchényi Library has contributed to the augmentation of the university's Hungarian library holdings since 1982 with sizable annual shipments of individually selected volumes. Occasionally, donations of

books were received from the World Federation of Hungarians as well as individuals.

The Chair's archival collection began in 1984 when the Hungarian Independent Mutual Benefit Federation entrusted it with the safekeeping of its records. The Federation also donated twelve feature and fourteen documentary films to the university's Audiovisual Library, laying the foundation for a Hungarian cinema collection. The same Federation presented the Chair with a bust of the poet Endre Ady by Géza Csorba; it stands in the courtyard of Innis College and is one of Canada's few public sculptures of Hungarian relevance.

In all, the Hungarian collections of the University of Toronto have grown into the most comprehensive in Canada, and one of the best in North America. The Hungarian Chair has also attempted to make the university a centre for the dissemination of research on Hungary. To this end, two major forums were developed: the Triennial Hungarian Studies Conference and the *Hungarian Studies Review*.

Since 1974, the American Hungarian Educators' Association has been in operation in the United States. At that time, it had about a dozen Canadian members and held its annual conference at different American universities. Since 1980, AHEA has met at the University of Toronto every third year, at the invitation of the Hungarian Chair. These meetings had a high Canadian attendance, brought together North American colleagues in Hungarian Studies and eventually suggested the need for a Canada-based association. As a result, the Hungarian Studies Association of Canada was conceived in 1984 and formed in 1985, holding its annual conference under the aegis of the Learned Societies. It intends to continue the tradition of triennial conferences in Toronto as a forum for intra-American exchange of research information.

Verba volant, scripta manent: while conferences are a primary means of exchanging verbal information, research of permanent value deserves to appear in print. As it happens, a unique English-language periodical had existed in Canada even before the initiation of the Hungarian Chair. *The Canadian-American Review of Hungarian Studies* was founded in 1974; by 1980 it was publishing its seventh volume.¹² In that year the University of Toronto met its implicit obligation, as stated in paragraph 5 of the Letter of Intent: "It is mutually agreed that, subject to the availability of funds, high priority attention should be given to the possibility of incorporating with the Chair, *The Canadian-American Review of Hungarian Studies*, or a similar scholarly journal." Since 1981, the periodical has been published under the new title *Hungarian Studies Review* with an editorial office attached to the Hungarian Chair.

A comparison of these developments with the goals stated in the founding agreements makes it obvious that the Chair has fulfilled all the expecta-

tions of the original fundraisers. During its first decade of existence, the Hungarian Chair has developed into the most stable teaching and research unit of its kind on the academic map of North America.

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While the first five years of the Chair's activity were characterized by the exploration of needs and possibilities, the second five-year period was one of stabilization, of building a tradition. In hindsight one can recognize certain miscalculations in judgment which were earlier obscured by their immediacy.

The date for the commencement of the Chair's activities was, undoubtedly, set in haste and without regard for the realities of the situation. To have the incumbent simultaneously start teaching and begin the many other chores stipulated in the agreements resulted in the stress of an unreasonable workload. In comparison, the incumbents of the subsequently established Ukrainian and Estonian History Chairs had a year to prepare for their duties.

Not all of the Chair's ventures were successful. One eventual failure was the attempt to set up guest lectures in fields outside of the Hungarian Chair's operational sphere — most notably, history and political science. The assumption was that the Hungarian-Canadian community would welcome interesting lectures in these fields. These events were co-sponsored by other university departments and programs. Between 1978 and 1984, eighteen lectures in history, political science, sociology, literature, linguistics and theatre history were fully or partly sponsored by the Hungarian Chair. While some of the lectures were initially well attended by members of the university, the lack of community interest was obvious from the outset. The support of university co-sponsors became merely symbolic — sometimes they were not represented at all — yet they shared the credit for the event but not the expenses or the responsibilities. Consequently, since 1985 no such lectures have been mounted; people who are interested in addressing colleagues and exchanging information, are encouraged to attend the annual conferences of the Hungarian Studies Association of Canada.

Certain members of Canada's Hungarian community were concerned that the university's Slavic Department was the locale for this centre of Hungarian Studies. In fact, the Hungarian Chair is an autonomous unit of the University of Toronto. The Slavic Department controls neither the content of the Hungarian courses nor the organizing and publishing activities of the Chair. The administrators of the department save the Chair from a great deal of paperwork and allow the incumbent the time to deal with more productive matters.

Last but not least, I should mention what used to be called "the problem of the Hungarian Chair." By the early 1980s, Canada's multicultural pol-

icy had developed certain undesirable side-effects. One of these was the preference among federal politicians for dealing with one umbrella organization per "ethnic" group, disregarding the institutional diversity of cultural communities. The result was in-group rivalry and often unsavory attempts to dominate an entire cultural group and terrorize its members.

During its first four years, certain elements of the Hungarian-Canadian community tried to extend their domination over the Hungarian Chair. When this proved unsuccessful, a two-year concentrated slander campaign was directed at the Chair, partly in the Hungarian-language press in Canada and elsewhere, and partly through the community grapevine. Also, efforts to intimidate people supportive of the Chair and its activities started; for instance, federal employees who attended conferences organized by the Chair, or were published in the *Review*, or simply were on friendly terms with the incumbent, were reported to the RCMP under various pretexts. The attacks coincided with the decisive five-year evaluation period of the Chair's activity and were aimed at destabilizing and discrediting the Chair just as it was gradually gaining more respect in the community. This campaign lasted from 1982 to 1984, then suddenly subsided. One reason why it ended might have been the fact that the newly elected federal government revised its policy toward cultural groups discouraging the activities of self-appointed spokespersons. Another probable reason was that the Hungarian Chair, in resisting attempts at outside interference, enjoyed the dedicated support of friendly associations, colleagues and university authorities.

No retrospection can be complete without a reflection on future prospects. For the Hungarian Chair, the prospects are rather bleak. During the first decade, its funds were not augmented by as much as a penny, while its operating expenses increased annually, just like any other service. This is why the University of Toronto is no longer assuming responsibility for any similar Chair that does not have funds totalling at least two million dollars. Moreover, the Hungarian Chair is unable to venture into new fields and enterprises (for which several plans already exist), and it is expected that some of its present activities will soon have to be discontinued. The university has already refused to contribute to the *Hungarian Studies Review's* editorial expenses after 1988.

The next decade will be decisive. If its operating funds are increased, the activities of the Hungarian Chair will be maintained and, if possible, expanded. If not, there is the possibility that after the retirement of the first incumbent, the Chair will have to continue its operation as a modest language instructorship, nothing more.

NOTES

- 1 The journalist Imre Székely Molnár wrote several essays on Hungarian Canadians; while Magda Zalán's entire volume, *Stubborn People* (Toronto: Stage

- and Arts Publishers, 1985), is a collection of interviews with and reports on successful members of this group.
- 2 The exhibition was compiled in 1986–88, consists of 100 panels and has been featured in eleven Canadian cities.
 - 3 N.F. Dreisziger, *Struggle and Hope: The Hungarian-Canadian Experience* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 1982), p. 223.
 - 4 Cf. N.F. Dreisziger, *The Hungarian Experience in Ontario*, special issue of *Hungarian Studies Review* XII, 2 (Fall 1985), pp. 66–67.
 - 5 Cf. bilingual “green-on-yellow flier”: “Hungarian-Canadian Cultural Studies Appeal/A magyar-kanadaiak felhívása egy Magyarság-tudományi Alap életre hívására.” This flier and copies of documents mentioned subsequently are preserved in the “Széchenyi File” of the Archives of the Hungarian Chair. Except for relevant remarks, no further reference to this file is provided in the text.
 - 6 Copies of these documents in the “Széchenyi File” are incomplete. The National Archives of Canada has on file additional material related to the campaign. Cf. Arthur Grenke’s report elsewhere in this issue, in particular item 6 in the section “Manuscript Division.”
 - 7 These events of the period between May-October 1973 are summarized in a report of the Széchenyi Society to its members, dated November 15, 1973.
 - 8 Campaign Report No. 26, dated December 31, 1976.
 - 9 Archives of the Hungarian Chair, “Intra-University File.”
 - 10 Cf. “Széchenyi File.”
 - 11 According to Dreisziger, such expectations existed all the time among the community, foiling earlier opportunities to establish Hungarian Chairs (*The Hungarian Experience in Ontario*, pp. 66–67). In the documents on file at the Hungarian Chair, they appear first mentioned in the internal report of the Széchenyi Society, dated November 15, 1973: “Leslie Duska asked the audience not to tackle the question who the incumbent will be since this challenged university autonomy [. . .]; however, he assured everybody that the University did not intend to hire someone whose person would embarrass the Hungarian community.”
 - 12 About the history of *The Canadian-American Review of Hungarian Studies*, cf. Dreisziger, *The Hungarian Experience in Ontario*, pp. 68–69. R.L. Aczel (University of London), in reviewing the *Hungarian Studies Review* and its predecessor, made the following assessment:

“[O]ver the . . . years of its existence [the *Hungarian Studies Review*] has produced a highly impressive body of scholarly work unparalleled in range, depth and consistency by any other contemporary venture of its kind in the Anglophone world. . . . The most impressive achievement of the *Review* . . . [has] been its publication of five special issues on themes of considerable importance. . . . To all those with an interest in Hungarian studies in the Anglophone world . . . the [*HSR*] continues to provide a rare and invaluable service.”
- R.L. Aczel, in *Hungarian Studies* (Indiana University) Vol. 3 (1987), pp. 260–62.