

Immigrant Fortunes and Misfortunes in Canada in the 1920s

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The Canada of the 1920s was a country of immigrants. This generalization is particularly true of the Prairie Provinces which were the recipients of most newcomers to the country. Hungarians were among the people who were arriving at the time in the Canadian West. They began coming in the second half of the 1880s, at first from the United States. More of them came at the turn of the century, this time directly from Hungary. During the First World War, immigration from the lands of the Central Powers ceased; however, after the war it slowly resumed. In the second half of the 1920s, thousands of Hungarians were landing in Canada every year.

Several studies cover the history of this early Hungarian immigration to Canada. Most of these works, however, deal with such topics as the process of emigration from Hungary, or with the history of various Hungarian settlements in the Canadian West. Relatively little information is available to immigration historians as well as members of the general reading public on the immigrant experiences and life-styles of individual newcomers in this period.² The purpose of this "documentary" article is to help to fill this gap in our knowledge. The means by which we hope to achieve this aim is to print translated excerpts from a little-known Hungarian-language work that throws a great deal of light on the subject. This work is the book of Sámuel Zágonyi, *Kanada egy európai bevándorló megvilágításában* [Canada Through the Eyes of an European Immigrant] which was published by the author in 1926 simultaneously in Budapest and Bridgeport, Connecticut.

Zágonyi's book contains an appendix-like section which records the Canadian experiences of three Hungarians who came to the Canadian West purportedly soon after World War I. The protagonists of our story are not named, nor does Zágonyi give any place names or dates that might help the reader in identifying anyone mentioned in this part of his book. This

concern for anonymity makes it difficult for us to place the three immigrants' experiences into an exact Canadian context. It also prevents us from checking on the veracity of Zágonyi's claims and his informants' stories. Nevertheless, the accounts of the three newcomers illustrate probably quite vividly the type of difficulties that were encountered by agricultural workers who came to the Canadian West at the time.

Zágonyi's three immigrants offer detailed descriptions of their experiences from the time of their departure from their homeland to their completion of the sixth year of their stay in Canada. According to the author, the three had met in transit and had made friends with each other. They decided to contact each other after a certain time and to get together for the purpose of comparing their Canadian experiences. Evidently Zágonyi learned of their undertaking, contacted them, and had each tell the story they told each other, to the readers of his book.³ Furthermore, he asked each of them to give an account of his journey across Central Europe and the Atlantic as well. Accordingly, a great deal of attention is devoted in this part of the book to details that are likely to interest most newcomers to the country: contacts with Canadian immigration authorities, travel arrangements, and the first steps in seeking work and shelter in Canada, and so on.

The stories told by Zágonyi's three immigrants illustrate the hardships and pitfalls that awaited newcomers to Canada at the time. Most of these stemmed from inexperience and from a lack of knowledge of Canadian practices and customs and even the country's economy and its climate. Among them the three newcomers encountered, or at least had heard of, just about every misfortune that awaited inexperienced immigrants. These ranged from becoming victims of con artists (often of their own nationality), to ending up working for relatives who considered newcomers a source of cheap labour. These experiences are paraded at length before the reader, obviously in order to impress upon all prospective immigrants to the country the need for caution and circumspection. Zágonyi's unstated, ulterior motive might have been the discouraging of his peasant countrymen from emigrating to Canada.

Much research would be needed for us to assess what kind of impact Zágonyi's book had on subsequent Hungarian immigrants to Canada. It would be probably safe to say that the book was published too late to have had much of an impact, and that it probably did not reach most of its intended audience. By the time it could have gained wide attention, a veritable exodus was taking place from many of Hungary's villages. In the last years of the 1920s, thousands of Magyars were arriving each year in the Canadian West. With the onset of the Great Depression in 1929–30, the influx was stemmed by Canadian authorities and, from that time on, only a trickle of immigrants was allowed from Hungary. It was made

up mainly of family members joining their immediate relatives in Canada. The Depression also virtually guaranteed that the Hungarian newcomers of the immediate post-war period, who had had such a difficult time to get started in Canada, would continue to face similar difficulties for many more years to come. Zágonyi's book deals with Hungarians; but the types of immigrant fates it pictures are probably characteristic of the fortunes of agricultural newcomers from most parts of Central, Southern, or Eastern Europe.

The translating and editing of this document has been a collaborative effort. Parts of the work were translated by Mrs. Beáta Fedák, Mrs. Monica Tarjan Grossman, and Professor George Bisztray. Some of the grammatical editing was done by Ms Anne McCarthy. The editor supervised this work, produced the final version of the text, and occasionally supplied explanatory remarks (or missing information) in square brackets. In translating and editing this material, efforts were made (perhaps not entirely successfully) to retain the flavour of the original, exemplified often by awkward language and very short paragraphs. However, a few single sentence paragraphs, and even some longer ones, were merged. Funds for this translation project had been received from the Department of Multiculturalism and Citizenship.

Notes to the Introduction

- 1 My work on the history of Hungarians in Canada has been supported through the years by research grants from Multiculturalism Canada and from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.
- 2 The most recent history of the Hungarian-Canadian community is N.F. Dreisziger *et al.*, *Struggle and Hope: The Hungarian-Canadian Experience* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982), see especially the chapter on the 1920s, "The Years of Growth and Change." See also N.F. Dreisziger, "Aspects of Hungarian Settlement in Canada, 1921–1931," in *Hungarian-Canadian Perspectives, Selected Papers* ed. M.L. Kovacs (Ottawa, 1980), special issue of the *Canadian-American Review of Hungarian Studies* Vol. VII, No. 1 (Spring, 1980), particularly pp. 51ff. Early Hungarian immigration to Canada is covered in M.L. Kovacs's chapter in *Struggle and Hope*, entitled "The Saskatchewan Era," as well as in M.L. Kovacs, "From Industries to Farming," *Hungarian Studies Review*, Vol. VIII, No. 1 (Spring 1981), pp. 45–60. For more information on the lives of Hungarians in Canada in the 1920s see my paper in the above volume of the *HSR*, "Immigrant Lives and Lifestyles in Canada, 1924–1939," pp. 61–83. A published original source on this subject is Ödön Paizs, *Magyarok Kanadában* [Hungarians in Canada] (Budapest, 1928). For unpublished, documentary information on this topic, see the reports that Hungarian Vice-Consul for Winnipeg, István Schefbeck Petényi, sent at the time to the Hungarian Foreign Office in Budapest. These are cited in Dreisziger, *Struggle and Hope*, p. 134, note 62. It might be added that Zágonyi's book gives very little information on him. All we know is that he was a retired army officer.
- 3 This is what we are led to believe by the author. However, it is not impossible

that the whole story of the three newcomers meeting on their journey and getting together many years later, is a literary device used by Zágonyi to make his informants' contrasting fates in Canada appear much more dramatic to the readers of his book. The fact that the three immigrants are not named is regrettable, but even more unfortunate (from the point of view of immigration historians) is the omission of not telling where in Hungary (or elsewhere in East Central Europe), they came from. Circumstantial evidence suggests that one of them at least, came from that part of the old Kingdom of Hungary which after 1918 became Slovakia, i.e. eastern Czechoslovakia.