

Struggle and Hope: the Hungarian-Canadian Experience
By N. F. Dreisziger with M. L. Kovacs, Paul Bódy and Bennett Kovrig

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The Hungarian-Americans. By Steven Bela Vardy
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While in recent years there has been a belated, but very timely and welcome interest in Hungary in the fate of the Hungarian minorities living in the states surrounding Hungary (unfortunately mainly due to the arrival of alarming news and thousands of refugees), much less attention has been paid to the Hungarians who live in North America, although their size stands near the million mark, outnumbering the Hungarian population both of Czechoslovakia and of Yugoslavia. It is true that in traditions, cohesion, and consequently in their chances for survival these Hungarians cannot be compared to those who never left their ancestral land, who were reduced to minority status only by the hand of history. Nevertheless the American-Hungarians (as they are seen from Hungary) or the Hungarian-Americans (which they have willy-nilly become) represent a large segment of all Hungarian-speakers, with a history recalling in turbulence and dramatism that of the main stock in the Carpathian Basin. What may lend further interest and importance to the study of their history is that the improvement in East-West and in particularly in Hungarian-U. S. (Canadian relations have already increased both official, scholarly and private contacts, and that development is bound to improve both the life-expectancy of the Hungarian communities of America and their chance of playing a role in the lot of the Hungarians in the old country and around it.)

In the United States and Canada a vigorous and academically very valuable branch of Hungarian history has surfaced in recent decades. American scholars (mainly born in Hungary but sometimes native Americans) have produced a substantial number of monographs and studies on Hungarian and East-Central European history, which rightly won the acclaim of the scholarly community, and began to be recognized – alas belatedly – in Hungary, too. A special section of this literature deals with the history of their own community, with the Hungarians of the United States and of Canada. Unlike the forerunners, too often rather pedestrian, laudatory, poorly researched pieces of antiquarianism, these are the works of trained and practising historians, who have already made many contributions on “larger”, mainly European or Hungarian issues. These authors are building on such traditions as the Hungarian *Siedlungsgeschichte* school which flourished in the inter-war period, but their main driving force is undoubtedly the “ethnic revival” of the 1970’s and the new encouragement shown to ethnic traditions by governments, agencies and popular trends. Unfortunately the writings appearing on the past of the American Hungarians (whether written in English or in Hungarian) are hardly known, almost never noticed (or reviewed), and on no account are for sale in Hungary; the main reasons for that are no longer political, but rather bureaucratic and economic: nobody has ever thought of selling Western books in the hard-currency shops in Hungary, and Western prices translated into forints would be hardly competitive in the bookshops in Hungary. (Perhaps one day joint ventures will enable these shops to stock such works, especially those related to Hungarian history.)

Struggle and Hope is a truly pioneering work: the first scholarly and comprehensive history of one hundred years of Hungarian life in Canada; many of its parts based on archival resources which required great pains to be located and researched. It also brought together some of finest American historians of Hungarian origin, who are equally at home in traditional (national or world) history and in ethnic studies. Special credit is due to the principal author, N. Dreisziger, who must have been the first to realize the need for a work of such type, was undeterred by the difficulty of finding sources and resources, and ensured the high quality of the result. The other contributors proved worthy colleagues in these tasks. Bennett Kovrig wrote a masterly short account of the history of the old country, an essential piece, since the many upheavals, territorial amputations, social and economic ills were the major cause of Hungarian emigration to America. Paul Bódy, the only author who is not a resident of Canada, prepared a very perceptive analysis of the motives and tendencies of that emigration, interspersed with telling personal accounts, interviews and other primary

recordings. His very careful study of the sources and figures of the Hungarian immigration into the whole North American continent presents the wider demographic background to the story of the Hungarian-Canadians. M. L. Kovacs recounted the saga of the first settlers, those Hungarian peasants who escaped from the intolerable industrial colonies of Pennsylvania to the prairies of Saskatchewan, where they "reconstituted themselves into folk communities [...] on the pattern of their ancestral villages". (p. 82.) This chapter is a summary of painstaking original research and writing done throughout several decades.

The remaining five chapters are the works of Nandor Dreisziger, who had already proved his skills in diplomatic, political and military history, and here shows a rare ability for understanding and elucidating the daily struggles of ordinary, simple, yet in many ways heroic people, who preserved so much from Hungary and contributed so generously to Canada. While the most important element in their epit is economic and social history, showing how they grew from a rural into an industrial, urbanized community, their cultural and religious life as well as their politics is duly recorded, making the whole not only a very readable and reliable but also an exciting account. Dreisziger also avoided the not uncommon pitfall of ethnic histories: he never lost his way in petty local squabbles, but was able to integrate the history of this particular Hungarian community into general Hungarian and Canadian history, showing the impact of the two world wars, the Great Depression, the post-1945 political changes in Hungary, and the 1956 uprising. He, too, had few predecessors to rely upon, and in view of this one is especially impressed by the mastery shown in discovering tendencies, patterns, dividing lines, prevailing frames of mind. Political controversy was never a rare feature among Hungarians, not even in Canada, but the author shows remarkable fairness, lack of bias, while not refraining from having an opinion and showing due criticism. The story unfolding is a true drama: high expectations followed by great advances in the 1920's, untold hardships throughout the 1930's in the wake of the Great Depression, leading also to political-ideological rifts, then the tormenting years of World War II when Hungary, largely a victim of hostile circumstances, became an enemy state, and lost many relatives and friends as well as territories precious for the Canadian-Hungarians, too. The 1950's at last turned into a Golden Age of prosperity, while the tragedy of 1956 proved also a source of new strength thanks to the sympathy and generosity aroused in the government and people of Canada, and also to the achievements of the 40,000 newcomers. The conclusion is still pending: demographic and social change making language and cultural maintenance precarious, but the new, encouraging attitude to ethnic diversity, the policy of multiculturalism, slowing down assimilation, in which the expansion of ties with the mother country must also have a say.

Steven Béla Vardy, a prolific professor from Pittsburgh, who has contributed much both to Hungarian and American historical scholarship, had a little easier task than his Canadian colleagues when he set out to write a short, comprehensive history of *The Hungarian-Americans*, since he could already rely on several modern studies, including the seminal work of Julianna Puskás of Budapest. Lack of adequate space was a great restraint, but Vardy turned it into an advantage: he produced a masterful short, but nevertheless thorough account, which can be (should be) enjoyed and read by all those 1.8 million Americans who claimed at least a partial Hungarian ancestry at the last census. Such a history naturally had to concentrate on the immigration, acculturation, internal political and cultural life, and achievements of the 850,000 ethnic Hungarian immigrants of the United States in the last hundred years. Vardy added some less common aspects: an attempt to reconstruct their political role as well as their political/social mentality. He covered the Hungarian-Americans' (necessarily limited) participation in American political life, their attitude to and influence on events back in Hungary, as well as the collective thinking and consciousness of the various groups emerging after 1945. In this reviewer's opinion these rather difficult and controversial subjects were tackled with great tact, objectivity and detachment, although the result is bound to displease some readers.

The major patterns and tendencies in the U. S. were similar to those observable in Canada, but there were major differences, too, as pointed out by the author. Despite the fact that 90 per cent of the pre-1914 Hungarian immigrants were peasants, in the United States they seldom went into farming, they hoped to get enough out of the mines and industries of the eastern regions to enable them to return to their home village. On the other hand, mainly after 1945, the middle class and intellectual element became far more marked than in Canada. The result was a politically more active, economically (at least in many individual cases) more successful, but also more divided group,

hence in the U. S. "Hungarian unity" became even more ephemeral and impossible than in its northern neighbour.

Vardy's approach is also chronological, but special chapters are devoted to the organizations, political and intellectual activities of each major wave of immigrants. It is not a narrow ethnic history: Hungary and its cataclysms always loom large in the background, and the many forms of interaction between the old country and the new are given due attention. The most original part explains the differences in the social background, fate and thinking in the three large groups of "the great political immigration": the 16,000 "45-ers", the 10,000 "47-ers", and the almost 50,000 "56-ers". Hardly anyone is more qualified to speak on the consciousness of the 45-ers than Professor Vardy, who had an opportunity to study them closely. He is quite right to emphasize that only a small proportion of this group was a supporter of the extreme right, their majority simply nurtured the pre-1945 world and their survivors even today represent an unique historical reservation of pre-war Hungary. Despite the illusory aspect of this attitude and the historically erroneous or at best one-sided picture they draw of the Horthy-era, this group, especially the Scouts movement which has strong ties with it, shows a remarkable (in my view in many ways commendable) veneration of the Hungarian past, not only of its "glorious" aspects, but of all really positive achievements, and spreads knowledge of that with admirable unselfishness and dedication, although with less success. While they are usually called conservative, and Vardy rightly finds their symbol in the political philosophy of Cardinal Mindszenty, he is mistaken to lump the late British historian C. A. Macartney together with this group. Perhaps the most conspicuous element of the historical consciousness of the 45-ers is that while they have a thorough knowledge of pre-1944 Hungarian history, they are completely in the dark about later developments, and make very few efforts to learn about them. But their relationship to the United States is also ambiguous, the one-time D. P.-s find it obviously hard to forget the cold, often hostile reception they received upon arrival and their inability to find themselves a place in American society commensurate with their education and position in old Hungary.

The lot of the 45-ers was in marked contrast to the support and sympathy those politicians received who fled from Hungary around 1947 when the post-war coalition was replaced by monolithic and Stalinist one-party rule. These people were envied and disliked or suspected by most of the other Hungarian-Americans, and even the dispassionate Vardy censures their inevitable involvement in the politics of the Cold War.

Whereas all previous waves of immigrants laid great emphasis on preserving their Hungarian heritage and made increasingly hopeless efforts to impart that into the second generation, Vardy tends to share the view that the 56-ers melted too readily and happily into the American mass, and thinks that one of its reasons was that they had received an "anticlassical and practical, antitraditional and progressive, antinationalist and prointernationalist, and even anti-Hungarian (i.e. disparaging of Hungarian historical traditions) and pro-Soviet" education and training in the 1950's (p. 118.). But I don't think that such an education was very effective and lasting, much of it had been instinctively rejected even when it was taught. Perhaps Vardy is right about the rapid assimilation of the numerical majority of the 56-ers, who - unlike the earlier groups - saw no hope to return and had increasingly little desire to do so, but I found that on the whole the 56-ers have not only become the most successful Hungarian immigrant group, but a very large part of them (whether numerically or only spiritually large, it is hard to say) has remained Hungarian not only in accent, language preferred, in culinary taste, but in consciousness as well. They may have apparently integrated into American life, may have married (and divorced) Americans, but in their academic positions, in their business affiliations, in the many odd places where they found themselves, they on the whole acted like good advocates of many good Hungarian causes, they patronized and spread Hungarian culture, helped (as far as it was possible and compatible with honesty and with their position) Hungarians and Hungary in many, often hardly noticeable ways. Perhaps their very best achievement was bringing together their two worlds, the old Hungarian one and the new American. Very often they acted and act in isolation, usually they did not join (or soon left) the various Hungarian associations, churches, other communities, were often impatient with their older compatriots, but they cannot escape their original nationality, and most of them do not want to do so. Some of these people are very history-conscious, have collected marvellous little libraries on Hungarian subjects, and lay great emphasis on furthering a better and more sympathetic knowledge of Hungarian history throughout America. The best brains

of the 56-ers also have an almost inexplicable, instinct affinity with a Central European approach to history, hoping for better understanding between the peoples of the Danubian basin.

Both works profited from the recent results of historywriting in Hungary, and Vardy (partly because of the nature of his book) was more influenced by them than his colleagues in Canada. Although he is far from uncritically accepting all their verdicts, sometimes it is not clear whether Vardy is simply quoting, or also agrees with his colleagues in Hungary, who are also beginning to disagree more often. Perhaps the post-45 emigrations are not so nationalist and anti-communists as they had been described, a better term might be patriotic and anti-Stalinist. Gyula Borbándi's recent history of the Hungarian political emigration¹ or László Papp's account of Hungarian students' movements in North America² has provided much evidence for that, while the new revelations about Stalin and his henchmen shed new light on the behaviour of those Hungarians who escaped from the terror of Rákosi.

The past and present of the American-Hungarians has been presented to the English-speaking public by Bódy, Dreisziger, Kovacs, Kovrig and Vardy. Further work is being done in Hungary, especially since the establishment of the Institute for Hungarian Studies at the National Széchényi Library. It is to be hoped that both sides are going to learn from the other and that Hungarians both in America and in the Carpathian Basin will become familiar with the results.

Géza Jeszenszky

1. Borbándi, Gyula, *A magyar emigráció életrajza, 1945-1985* [The history of the Hungarian emigration] (Bern: Európai Protestáns Magyar Szabadegyetem, 1985)

2. Papp, László ÉMEFESZ, *Az amerikai magyar egyetemisták mozgalma az 1956-os forradalom után* [The movement of American Hungarian students after the revolution of 1956] (New Brunswick: Magyar öregdiák Szövetség Bessenyei György Kör, 1988)

Aujourd'hui

Anthologie de la littérature hongroise contemporaine
(Editions Corvina, 1987, 236 p.)

On ne peut que se réjouir, a priori, de la parution en langue française d'une anthologie de la littérature hongroise contemporaine: un tel ouvrage, pour autant qu'il respecte les critères essentiels requis par le genre, pourrait trouver sa place dans le processus de constitution de cette "langue mondiale de la poésie" dont Gy. Somlyó, après H. M. Enzesberger, croit discerner les prémices. La question qu'il faut alors se poser est la suivante: cette anthologie se soumet-elle suffisamment, raisonnablement, aux lois du genre?

Bien que le titre et le sous-titre de l'ouvrage prêtent assez malencontreusement à confusion, son contenu est pour l'essentiel conforme au champ qui nous est présenté par l'auteur de l'avant-propos, E. Tóth: par littérature hongroise "contemporaine", il ne faut pas entendre principalement littérature hongroise *actuelle*, moins encore *d'avant-garde*, *d'aujourd'hui*, comme le donnerait à penser le "MA"¹ emprunté à Kassák, mais littérature hongroise moderne, de l'entre-deux-guerres à nos jours. La référence appuyée au "Nyugat", crée en 1908,² et à ses trois générations successives, ainsi que la place fort modeste réservée aux auteurs nés après 1945, le montrent bien. Mais comment justifier, dans une telle perspective, l'éviction du grand poète A. József, alors même que la poésie, qui nous est justement présentée comme le genre dominant en Hongrie, occupe une bonne partie de l'ouvrage?

Si "la fleur" (anthos) des poètes "contemporains", avec G. Illyés, J. Pilinszky, L. Nagy, S. Weöres, I. Vas, F. Juhász, S. Csoóri, A. Nemes Nagy, semble pour le reste convenablement représentée, les oeuvres choisies (legein) sont-elles aussi "la fleur" de la production de chacun d'eux, et les textes français, ainsi que leur présentation, permettent-ils au lecteur d'en apprécier le parfum?

Seul un bon connaisseur, et de surcroît impartial, est en mesure d'apporter une réponse satisfaisante à la première question. Nous nous contenterons seulement, concernant G. Illyés, de déplorer l'absence