

## HUNGARIANS IN AMERICA

L. S. Domonkos  
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The first historically verifiable Hungarian in North America was a poet and classics scholar Steven Parmenius of Buda, who participated in Sir Humphrey Gilbert's expedition to Newfoundland. Parmenius was born of Protestant parents in the Hungarian capital of Buda, studied at an English university and was appointed official chronicler of the expedition. On August 29, 1583 the ship carrying Parmenius was lost in a violent storm. This was not a very auspicious beginning of Hungarian ties to America.

In the two centuries that followed Parmenius' tragic adventure in Newfoundland, few Hungarians appear to have had a desire to see the New World. This did not mean, however, that interest in the events unfolding in America did not intrigue Hungarians. The course of the War of Independence from Britain was followed with fascination by a nation which was living under harsh Hapsburg domination and had fought several wars of independence of its own.

Not only was there sympathy for the American cause, but action as well. Several Hungarians joined the colonial armies and fought against the British. The best known among these was Colonel Mihály (Michael) Korváts, who became Master of Exercises in the famous Pulaski Legion, which was America's first cavalry regiment. The Pulaski Legion fought a number of successful engagements against the English, including the Battle of Charleston (S.C.) in May of 1779, where Colonel Korváts gave his life for American independence. A number of cavalry officers of Hungarian origin also fought in the ranks of the French forces, which came to assist General Washington in the war with the British.

After the success of the American Revolution, Hungarian interest in the New Republic became even more intense. This is particularly true after the publication of some travel books composed by Hungarians, who wrote about their adventures in America in the 1830s and 1840s. The most significant of these travel accounts were by Sandor Bölönyi-Farkas entitled Journey to North America, published in 1834, describing the authors experiences during a visit to the North-Eastern United States, and a similarly titled volume by Agoston Haraszti, published in 1844 and widely read in Hungary. It is interesting to note that Haraszti played a major role in the development of a new wine producing region in California, namely Sonoma County.

In the meantime a political earthquake shook Europe in 1848. Revolutions against the existing order broke out all over the continent, including Hungary. Hungary's revolt against Austrian domination was viewed with great sympathy in America, both in Congress as well as the popular press.

The Revolution of 1848 failed when the Austrian Emperor called upon the Russian Czar to come to his assistance. The Governor of Hungary, Louis Kossuth, was forced to flee his homeland, first to Turkey then to England, as Russian troops overran Hungary. Aware of strong popular sentiment in the U. S. for the Hungarian cause,

Kossuth came to America in 1851. His welcome was tumultuous. After his landing in New York where he was greeted by 300,000 people, he made a triumphant circuit of the United States. His itinerary included, Philadelphia, Washington D. C., Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, Cincinnati, St. Louis, New Orleans, all the major cities east of the Mississippi.

Although America fell in love with the brilliant orator from Hungary, this popularity could not be translated into tangible help from the United States for the cause of freedom in his native land. Disappointed by the isolationist policies of the government, Kossuth returned to Europe. Many of the Hungarian exiles who had accompanied him to America, stayed behind to make their fortunes in this strange and fascinating land. 5

It is estimated that at the time of the outbreak of the Civil War, there were only about 4,000 Hungarians in the United States. Of these, about 800 served in the Union army, among them about a hundred officers. As refugees from oppression, it is not surprising that Hungarian immigrants, many of them veterans of the War of Independence in 1848, would offer their services to the Union in this conflict. Only one Hungarian officer, with the rank of colonel, fought on the side of the Confederacy, but by 1863 even he became disenchanted and returned to Europe.

Most Hungarians who reached these shores up to the 1860s and 1870s were either travelers, adventurers or political immigrants. True, there were a few who came for economic reasons even then, but their numbers were rather insignificant. Thus, as late as the 1870s, the Hungarian-American communities scattered throughout this land consisted almost exclusively of the political emigrants who came with Kossuth after the failed War of Independence in 1848, and their descendants.

Then came the great tidal wave which swept literally millions into the United States between 1880 and 1914. Among these were about 1.7 million men and women who were citizens of the Kingdom of Hungary.

The great Hungarian emigration during the 3 1/2 decades between 1880 and 1914 was a phenomenon that was not unique. ~~[Those of you, who have been attending these dinners and lectures have heard.]~~ We know about the experiences of a number of central and eastern European ethnic groups, who arrived in the New World during this same period, were generally of the same social class, faced the similar problems of adjustment in an often hostile environment. If you arrived in New York in 1907, it made very little difference whether you were Polish, Ukrainian, Slovak, Croation, Serbian, Romanian, Montenegian or Hungarian. In other words there is no "unique" Slovak, Croation or Hungarian experience. ~~[The pattern is generally very similar, and most of you are by now quite familiar with it. I will, therefore, try to paint a picture in broad outlines.]~~

As stated above, prior to 1914 about 1.7 million Hungarian citizens immigrated to this country. But this number is deceiving. Since the Hungarian Kingdom prior to 1918 was a multi-national state, many Hungarian citizens were ethnically and linguistically non-Magyars. <sup>thru</sup> Thus Hungarian citizenship did not necessarily mean that the immigrant arriving in Ellis Island was a "real Hungarian" -

Most recent studies have put the number of ethnic Magyars among the 1.7 million somewhere around 650-750,000 people. If we add to this the approximately 200,000 Magyars who came to the United States between 1914 and now, then we have a total Magyar immigration of 850-950,000 individuals. The overwhelming majority of these immigrants were motivated by economic considerations, not political. Furthermore, over 80% were of peasant stock, the rest usually fell into the category of unskilled industrial workers and day laborers. Educated people, especially professionals with university degrees, were a very small minority.

*preponderance* If we look at gender divisions we find that there was a male *preponderance* In the first few years the number of women is negligible, between the turn of the century and 1913 the average is 69% males to 31% females but the percentage was growing in favor of the women as we approach World War I. By 1913 women constituted 53% to 48% men. The low number of women, especially between 1880 and 1905 is indicative of an extremely important factor, namely that the majority of Hungarians who came to the New World looked upon their immigration as a temporary solution. More specifically, it was a search for work by able bodied men, who had every intention to return to their homeland and to their families as soon as this was economically feasible.

Closely connected with the originally temporary nature of Hungarian immigration to the U. S. was the age bracket of the new arrivals. They were young: 24% below age 20; 73% between 20 and 50 years old, only 2.6% above age 50. The overwhelming majority are therefore of working age ~~category~~, and are unincumbered by families, elderly parents, small children of non-working dependents. Although predominantly of peasant or working class background, the Hungarian immigrants had a remarkably high literacy rate, i.e. 88.6% [knew how to read]. In light of the above there is much to be said for the view that, while driven primarily by poverty and economic necessity, the immigrants of the pre-1914 period did not necessarily represent the most forsaken of the most underprivileged segment of Hungary's lower classes. It was not the lazy, shiftless, dispirited people who came to America, but just the opposite: those who were ambitious, more adventurous and obviously bright. The fact that they left their homeland was an obvious loss to Hungary, that they came and eventually stayed in America, has been the good fortune of this country. They came and worked and sweated and helped to build the industrial might of the United States.

As we have seen, by far the greatest number of the Hungarian immigrants of pre-W.W. I were peasants ~~peasants~~ yet very few of them continued agricultural labor in this country. Rather they settled mainly in the industrial centers of the North East and Mid-West. According to 1920 statistics the major concentration of Magyar immigrants were located in the following areas. About 78,000 lived in N. Y. state, [with about 65,000 in N. Y. City.] Next in size was Ohio with 73,000 with 30,000 in Cleveland, the rest mainly in the Akron, Barberton, Youngstown, Toledo areas. Pennsylvania followed with 71,000; [of which 26,000 were in the Pittsburgh region, about 12,000 in Philadelphia.] New Jersey had 40,000 Hungarians [mostly in Perth Amboy, Newark, Passaic, New

~~Brunswick and Trenton~~; 34,000 settled in Illinois, [~~of which 26,000 lived in Chicago~~], 22,000 in Michigan, [~~over half of them in Detroit~~], 20,000 in Connecticut. [~~Mostly in Bridgeport, Hartford, and South Norwalk~~]. Indiana attracted some 12,000 Hungarians, concentrated mainly in S. Bend, Gary and East Chicago. There were about 10,000 in Wisconsin. [~~with half living in Milwaukee~~]; about the same number in Missouri of which 2/3 resided in St. Louis's West Virginia had 6,200 Hungarians. [~~Almost all of them living in Pocahontas~~]. In 1920 there were 5,200 in California, of which some 1,700 lived in Los Angeles area, about 1,400 in San Francisco. The rest of the Magyar population was scattered throughout the country. It is interesting to note that the geographical distribution has not changed much in the decades following this census. Only in the 1960s was there a gradual shift from the N. E. largely to Florida and California. Those who went to Florida were mainly the elderly, those who went West, were young and well educated, sought high paying jobs in the Golden State.

While it is true that America was the "Land of Opportunity" and provided some economic advancement, the streets were not paved with gold. The new immigrants were forced to work and live under the most miserable conditions. They also had to face the realities of a society that barely tolerated them. To be a "hunky" was not an easy lot. The coal field and steel mills were extremely dangerous places to work, the injury and fatality rates were high. Yet they worked with great diligence: They scraped and scrounged, saved every possible dollar and counted the days when they had amassed enough money to return to the Old Country to buy 20-30 acres of land and settle down to raise a family, surrounded by the familiar world which they loved. Not being interested in staying, the majority of the pre-WWI immigrants did not seek to acquire American citizenship. It is also true that tens of thousands did in fact return to Europe prior to 1914. Those who stayed here did not buy houses but usually lived in boarding houses.

But this impermanence did eventually change. The fact that the number of immigrant women increased dramatically before WWI clearly shows that many family units were being established, most of these would have stayed under any circumstances. What made most Hungarian immigrants stay in the U. S. permanently was the Great War, and the peace settlement following it. As the result of the dismemberment of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and the drastic reduction of Hungary's size, many immigrants found that if they returned to Europe their former homes would be part of a new state, they were to become a minority in an often hostile country. Conditions in Hungary proper were also uncertain, both politically and economically. So they stayed and slowly became Americans.

Instead of living in boarding houses they began buying homes, built churches, established newspapers, fraternal mutual aid societies, clubs, orphanages, schools, etc. . . The outside world was still hostile, so they tried to recreate in their ethnic enclave a miniature Hungarian world in America. Above all they adhered to their faith, Catholic and Protestant alike, and built their churches to be able to pray to God in their native tongue. [~~In Youngstown this meant the building of two Reformed or Presbyterian churches, this and the smaller congregation just a few~~

~~blocks up on Mahoning, two Catholic Churches, St. Stephen of Hung  
on Wilson and Our Lady of Hung. on the west side and one Byzantine  
Rite Church, St. George.]~~

Following World War I the number of immigrants was drastically reduced as a result of Congressional legislation which tried to stem the flow of non-Western Europeans to our shores. But Hungarians continued to come. In the 1920s ~~and~~ 30s large numbers of women came to join their husbands and fiancées. In the inter-war period, because of economic and political factors, many educated professionals made their way to America and our enriched society with their talents. ~~More about them shortly.~~ Following WWII, another immigrant wave reached these shores, people who had to flee their homeland as the result of the Soviet occupation of Hungary. They came to America under the Displaced Persons Act, were often referred to as D.P.s. ~~This is the group to which my parents belonged. Several dozen D.P. families settled in Youngstown, a very large number in Cleveland.]~~ Most of these immigrants were middle class, professional people with a very strong desire to succeed and to see their children advance. Then came the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, that glorious but tragic event which captured the attention and sympathy of the world. When Russian tanks crushed the Revolution, 200,000 people left Hungary, a large number were admitted into the U. S. ~~Several hundred came to Yo. I remember as a Freshman at Y. U., sitting in this hall as the mayor and council welcomed the new arrivals to our community.]~~ Most of these were young, ambitious men and women who adjusted to American life quickly.

In the last three decades immigration from Hungary has decreased to a trickle. Until the end of the 1980s, people who were persecuted for religious or political reasons in Hungary, sought political refuge in the West, often migrated to America. ~~[At the Refugee Resettlement Home next door, we have tried to make their transition to American life easier. We have also helped many ethnic Hungarians who fled persecution, mainly in Communist Romania, and sought refuge in America.]~~

With the fall of communism and the elimination of the Iron Curtain there is no appreciable flow of Hungarian immigrants. ~~to America.]~~ It is estimated that there are about 750,000 Americans of Hungarian ethnic background living in the U. S. today. This is not a large number when compared to other immigrant groups. These Hungarian-Americans have been a valuable asset to our nation. They are remarkably law abiding, hard working and ambitious, and have contributed to this land both with the sweat of their brows, as well as with the multitude of their talents.

About two decades ago there were five Hungarian born Nobel Prize winners teaching at American research institutions and universities: 1. Albert Szent-Györgyi, the discoverer of Vitamin C; 2. George von Békési of Harvard who received the prize in medicine; 3. Prof. Eugene Wigner in Physics; 4. George von Hevesi, Nobel laureate in Chemistry; and Dennis Gábor, who won the prize in Physics for his invention of holography. This is only the tip of the iceberg. Thousands of Hungarian born scientists and scholars hold prestigious positions at American universities and research institutes. Others have made their contribution to the

arts, to cinema, music and <sup>the</sup> humanities. For a nation of only ten million people, this is an impressive record by any standard.

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If we look at gender divisions we find that there was a male preponderance. In the first few years the number of women is negligible, between the turn of the century and 1913 the average is 69% males to 31% females but the percentage was growing in favor of the women as we approach World War I. By 1913 women constituted 53% to 48% men. The low number of women, especially between 1880 and 1905 is indicative of an extremely important factor, namely that the majority of Hungarians who came to the New World looked upon their immigration as a temporary solution. More specifically, it was a search for work by able bodied men, who had every intention to return to their homeland and to their families as soon as this was economically feasible.

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*The early history of Hungar<sup>\*</sup>s . . . .*