

INTRODUCTION

Mr. McKinley sent out word
Many workers are needed now;
So don't fear, there'll soon be jobs,
Mr. Mckinley sits upon the throne.
Long live McKinley!
So don't fear etc. repeat

[*Amerikai Nemzetőr*,² April 14, 1897]

Hungarian emigrants, responding in rising numbers at the turn of the century to the economic opportunities in America conveyed by this little song which, according to the newspaper to which a József Mihályovits had sent it, was on the lips of every Hungarian in Yonkers, N.J., came from a land that was joined to Austria in a Dual Monarchy established by the Compromise of 1867 between Austria and Hungary after the failure of Hungary's 1848-49 War of Independence against the Habsburg regime. With Francis Joseph as emperor of Austria and king of Royal Hungary, the two nations remained formally independent with respect to their internal affairs through separate parliaments and state governments but had ministers-in-common for the management of foreign affairs, military defense, and government finances; the Hungarians were also bound economically to Austria by a customs union and common banknotes and commodity and currency regulations. The settlement created a *modus vivendi* between the two nations, but despite the fact that Hungary, in the opinion of historians, enjoyed the greatest internal independence since its last king, Lajos II, who fell at Mohács in 1526 in a battle against the invading Turks, it did not stifle the yearning of Hungarians for complete independence or dissuade them from believing that the Austrian establishment, deliberately preventing the growth of Hungarian industries to reduce competition, forced Hungary to remain an agricultural nation serving the needs of the industrially developed areas of the Monarchy. Above all, still in place in Hungary were the very social, political, and economic institutions and atti-

² The reader is asked to consult pp. 554-559 for the English translation of the name or title of a printed or archival source that appears in introductory sections and, at the same time, has provided a document or an illustration for the text.

tudes which had historically plagued the nation and which were to rouse the largest wave of emigration it was ever to know.

The prevailing two-level social system reflected the dominance of the so-called "gentleman" class over nearly every aspect of Hungarian life during the period of Dualism: the owners of landed estates, nobles, and those whose bloodlines qualified them for officer commissions. About four to five thousand wealthy landowners, owning estates of 1500 acres or more, or about 35 percent (another four thousand owned 15 percent), controlled the nation and its citizens by occupying the major posts in the national government, parliament, and county administrative units. Their power was buttressed by the high property qualification which, together with other restrictions, denied the right to vote to landless peasants, workers employed by others, house servants, employees, and most artisans and shopkeepers living mainly in the villages and towns of the provinces, in effect limiting the exercise of the franchise to about six percent of the population.

Peasants and laborers constituted the second and bottom level of Hungarian society. Peasants, who with their families made up two-thirds of the population and who, though they represented 99 percent of the nation's landowners, owned only 56 percent of the land, faced enormous difficulties in maintaining a decent standard of living for their families on their dwarf holdings. But even below these smallholders were the landless agricultural workers who at the beginning of the twentieth century still numbered about two million and comprised about forty percent of the agrarian work force. By the end of the century, landless peasants made up more than one-fourth of Hungary's total population, which grew from about fifteen million at the time of the Compromise to nearly 21 million in 1910, with nearly 75 percent itinerant day laborers surviving at subsistence level. About fifteen percent of the peasantry owned parcels of land so small that their livestock and crops could not adequately support their families. It is estimated that only thirty percent owned enough land to maintain families solely through their own labor. But deprivation of the right to vote and desperate economic conditions were not the only barriers to a good life for Hungarian peasants. In addition, all peasants felt the discriminatory provisions of the 1876 Agricultural Labor Act, which restricted their equality before the law and personal freedom by placing hired workers and servants "under the authority of [their] master" and subject to light physical punishment at his hands and by authorizing the forcible return by the police of any worker who abandoned his job; they also were among the targets of the new penal code passed by parliament in 1878 that banned all agitation against property, social class, and nationhood.

To these two major social classes can be added a third, one directly related to emigration from Hungary: the minorities that had made Hungary into a multinational state particularly since the seventeenth century in the post-Turkish period. These nationalities, who inhabited the fringes of Royal Hungary and showed the earliest signs of large emigration to America from Hungary, increasingly looked upon themselves as non-Hungarians—as Slovaks, Ruthenians, Rumanians, Serbs, Slovenes, and other nationalities.³ They became the targets of an illiberal and shortsighted national policy that remained in place until the Dual Monarchy itself vanished from the scene with the defeat of the Central Powers in the Great War. Comprising about fifty percent of the total population in Hungary, they were granted only a minor role in the nation's political life, having only five percent representation in parliament and ten percent in the state's administrative system. The Nationalities Act of 1868, which declared Hungary a "single nation, the indivisible, unitary Hungarian nation," acknowledged their existence as Hungarian citizens who spoke different languages. But later the use of those languages was practically banned in governmental administration and even in the law courts. In addition, though the churches of the minorities retained their autonomy until the twentieth century, Hungarian politicians and clergymen both pursued policies that imposed the Hungarian language upon both public and denominational education. The 1879 Education Act made compulsory the teaching of Hungarian in all non-Hungarian schools and teachers colleges; the 1891 Education Act added the requirement to nursery schools. Eventually, secondary and even primary education was conducted almost entirely in Hungarian, exceeding by far what the constituency warranted. Moreover, at the turn of the century Hungarians' fears of Pan-Slavism intensified at the revival of nationalism in the minorities as the Slovaks in Bohemia and Rumania to the north and east respectively and Serbia to the south began to interfere in the relations between Hungary and Croatia, a "unitary state" within Hungary's jurisdiction, to promote Southern Slav unity with the aim of separating Croatia from the Dual Monarchy. These fears of Pan-Slavism strongly influenced the formulation of the government's American Action, which was designed to stimulate repatriation, by advocating and establishing measures to discourage the return of non-Hungarian-speaking citizens, in order to assure a growing preponderance of *real* Hungarians, i.e., those who spoke Hungarian as their mother tongue.

These comments on class structure are not meant to obscure the considerable social and economic progress made during Dualism.

³ See p. 480 for the percentage breakdown by nationalities.

Hungary's judiciary was modernized, its financial system was organized and its national debt brought under control, and its educational and cultural level greatly elevated. However, despite these achievements, Hungary remained a relatively poor country whose political structure excluded the vast majority of its people from advancing their welfare through the ballot box, whose attitude toward the nationalities boded ill for future national unity, and whose agricultural production and emerging industrial sector could not meet the needs of vast numbers of its population.

In the agricultural sector, the instability of the peasants remained unrelieved. The unequal distribution of land hampered any effort on the part of smallholders to enlarge their holdings to achieve a better life and bound agrarian laborers to seasonal and migratory work. And though agriculture was the main support of the nation's economy during Dualism, their situation worsened. Aside from the impact of the severe European agricultural depression that diminished only at the close of the century, technological progress worsened the life of the already struggling peasant class. Improved soil cultivation, more frequent crop rotation, the introduction of the iron plow and the threshing machine—these advances in farming methods made agriculture more seasonal and produced chronic unemployment, forcing many smallholders to break up their holdings for survival, and set large numbers of landless agrarian adrift to fend for themselves and their families as best they could. Unlike American farmers who, at this time, were also being displaced by technological progress, Hungarian smallholders and agrarian day laborers could not head for the city and its industries for employment to relieve their lot.

In Hungary, industrialization, which began growing in the 1880s, lacked a solid historical foundation in manufactures, and Hungary had even lost some of its industries as a consequence of the customs union the Compromise established with Austria. In mid-nineteenth century, nearly 85 percent of its population was dependent on agriculture for a livelihood, and though Hungary's industrial output had doubled by 1913, agriculture was still the source of two-thirds of the national income. Hungary's industrial development crested between 1890 and 1913, but even then it could not provide enough jobs for its surplus agrarian population. In 1900, for example, industrial employment was obtained only by one-tenth of the wage-earners. Ironically, the needs of Hungary's iron and machine industries for skilled manpower, both of which were encouraged by the economic division of labor operating within the Dual Monarchy, could not be met through the employment of surplus agricultural laborers; instead, it was necessary to turn to the more industrialized regions of Austro-

Hungarian Empire. It became increasingly clear that the hardships of many could be alleviated only by seeking employment opportunities abroad. Even though the industrial work force grew by about 490 thousand in the peak period 1890-1913, more than a million citizens emigrated in 1900-10, mostly to America, the "distant fabled land." To them emigration was the only escape, not so much from starvation or homelessness as from the pervasive instability and uncertainty that indigence imposed on their daily lives.

In an article in the May 18, 1910 issue of the *Szabadság*—near the end of a decade of the largest emigration from Hungary to the United States and only four years distant from the termination of that emigration by World War I—a journalist raised the question "Are there by now so many of us that we could make up the population of a small democracy?" and, without counting the "foreign-speaking native Hungarians," he concluded, on quite unscientific grounds, that the number of American-Hungarians, or those who spoke Hungarian, was "approaching a million, and so it is not an exaggeration when we speak of one million American-Hungarians." Despite the claim, however, the unreliability of contemporary statistical sources make problematical even more recent attempts to determine accurately the number of Hungarian citizens who emigrated to America before 1914, as well as the precise number of those forming the category of real Hungarians. The records of the twelve European seaports from which the emigrants embarked show that 2,038,383 boarded ships for America from 1871 to 1913, with 1,171,758 from 1900 to 1909 and 433,230 from 1910 to 1913, of whom 86 percent headed for the United States; and the Hungarian Statistical Office reports that from 1910 to 1913, 1,196,477 citizens went overseas. The United States Immigration Office registers 1,815,117 from 1871 to 1913, with 1,053,333 from 1900 to 1909 and 410,480 from 1910 to 1913. Attempts to estimate the total emigration have increased recently. The authors of *Magyarország története 1890-1914* (A History of Hungary, 1890-1914. Budapest, 1978) claim a loss of 1,200,000 persons in the years 1869-1910; and István Rácz, deducting 400-500,000 remigrants from an estimated two million emigrants, arrives at 1,500,000 persons [*A paraszti migráció és politikai megítélése Magyarországon 1849-1914* (The Peasant Migration and its Political Assessment in Hungary 1849-1914) Budapest, 1980]. Problems attend all these estimates because they fail to distinguish between emigrants and passengers, to take illegal departures into account, and/or to allow for the counting of the 23-25 percent of the emigrants who made the journey to America and back at least twice.

In an effort to answer this question, Julianna Puskás, who has dealt most extensively with the quantitative question of Hungarian immi-

gration, turns to the above estimates provided by the seaports, the Hungarian Statistical Office, and the United States Immigration Office [*Kivándorló magyarok az Egyesült Államokban. 1880-1940* (Immigrant Hungarians in the United States, 1880-1940). Budapest, 1982]. By determining the number of immigrants in overseas traffic figures and balancing out the differences among these statistical sources, she concludes that the number of citizens who emigrated from Hungary between 1871 and 1913 totaled 1,200,000 at the very most. Ultimately she limits the time span for her estimate to the period 1880-1910, on the grounds that mass migration to the United States did not commence until the 1880s and her doubts about the accuracy of data available for the period 1860-1880. Using different evaluative methods from those of other authorities and applying several controls, Puskás calculates that of the nearly two million citizens who left Hungary during the three decades she examines, 886,072 comprise what she calls the "emigration remainder," or the difference between births and actual population growth in Hungary at the time. She stresses that this figure represents outward migration in general and not merely to America.

As substantial as these figures remain for a nation with a population of 21,000,000 in 1910, they hardly support the claims of the "loss of [Hungarian] blood" rife after the turn of the century when the composition of the nationalities is taken into account. Specialists think otherwise. Puskás, for example, believes that of the total number of emigrants from 1899-1913, the peak years, 31.8 percent were persons who spoke Hungarian as their native language. The remaining 68.2 percent consisted of the following nationalities: Slovak 16.4 percent, German 14.3 percent, Croat 9.7 percent, Ruthenian 3.3 percent, Serb 1.7 percent, Rumanian 22.8 percent, and others 0.3 percent. Thus, when emigrants from Hungary are classified as Hungarian-speaking and non-Hungarian-speaking, then clearly two-thirds were made up of minorities. Other immigration specialists arrive at similar totals for Hungarian-speaking emigrants from Hungary. Paula Benkart, an American authority, estimates that in the period 1899-1914 about 458,000 of the immigrants from Hungary in America were Hungarian-speaking ["Hungarians," *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*. Cambridge, Mass., 1980]; and Miklós Szántó puts their total number for the period 1871-1913 at 500,000 [*Magyarok Amerikában* (Hungarians in America). Budapest, 1984]. Várdy, another noted American authority, sets the figure at about 650,000 for the period 1850-1914, believing that among the one-fourth to one-third of the immigrants who left Hungary illegally, more were Hungarian-speaking because authorities, in order to preserve Hungary's nationhood and territorial integrity, were more reluctant to

issue the required exit documents to them than to the ethnic minorities [Steven B. Várdy and Ágnes Huszár Várdy. *The Austro-Hungarian Mind: at Home and Abroad*. Boulder and New York, 1989].⁴

Information about the composition of Hungarian immigrants and about their personal aims in America provides a basis for understanding the character of their occupational relations with America and the way of life they followed. In the first stage, 1849-80, the roots of economic immigration from Hungary become increasingly apparent after the Civil War, when chiefly shopkeepers and artisans in search of a better livelihood began to arrive: middle-class Germans from Hungary's western and southern regions and miners from its northern counties. During the second stage, 1880-1900, the growing number of artisans were joined by peasants in such large numbers that by the third stage, 1900-13, they became the dominant segment. The reports of the United States Commissioner-General of Immigration for the period 1900-13 on 406,656 Hungarian-speaking immigrants disclose that such professionals as ministers, engineers, writers, musicians and artists, and educators totaled a mere 1739, and such skilled workers as bakers, barbers, blacksmiths, carpenters, machinists, locksmiths, bricklayers, shoemakers, and tailors amounted to only 22,251. The report reveals the extent to which the agricultural worker, included among 275,223 workers in occupations not reported in the above category, dominated the picture: 120,643 agricultural workers, 1857 landowners, 107,967 workers (without further designation), 1193 merchants, and 42,735 servants. Hungarian statistical sources also support the view that at the turn of the century occupational distribution had radically shifted toward agricultural day laborers. They indicate that agriculture was the predominant occupation among 452,688 emigrants during the peak period of 1905-07: 76,834 (17.0%) were agriculturalists and 233,882 (51.6%) agricultural servants and day laborers, or 68.6% of the total [*Magyar Statisztikai Közlemények* (Hungarian Statistical Review), vol. 67, 1918]. Várdy adds to the 17 percent of independent agriculturalists and the 51.6 percent of the agricultural servants and day laborers the 9.5 percent of day laborers and the 5.2 percent of domestic servants included in the above report, who, he maintains, were almost entirely from the peasant class, as well as about half of the 11.3 percent of the unskilled industrial workers and day laborers also shown in the preceding report on the grounds that many of them had only recently migrated to the cities from the villages [*The Hungarian-Americans*. Boston, Mass., 1985]. These inclusions raise the total percentage of

⁴ The United States censuses for 1910 and 1920 found what are considered excessively low numbers of immigrants who spoke Hungarian, the former 315,183 and the latter 473,538.

peasants to about 89, or a ratio of 88.3 for Hungary proper and 92.3 for Croatia, figures which, Várdy acknowledges, other historians may find too high. Be that as it may, Hungarian-speaking immigrants mainly from the peasantry headed for the mills, mines, and factories of industrial America, where they could, after minimal training, qualify for the usually high wages paid for semi-skilled work in the urban areas and mining settlements, widely considered to be at least four or five times what they would receive for similar work in Hungary, even if enough jobs had been available to them in the homeland.

The immigrants from Hungary consisted mainly of young males, particularly after the late 1890s, mostly under thirty years old and single or newly married; many of the older married men came without their wives and families. According to Hungarian statistics, women comprised one-third of the male-female ratio, and, according to United States statistics, were between fourteen and twenty-nine years of age. Although few in number in the early years of immigration, they later came in mounting numbers to join husbands or to marry, exceeding 30 percent in 1908 and outnumbering men by 52.1 to 47.9 percent by 1913, a phenomenon considered by some authorities as firm evidence that, for whatever reason, the thoughts of the immigrants were turning from repatriation to permanent settlement in America. It must also be noted that contrary to the belief widely held in America at the time about the intellectual capacity of the new immigration, immigrants from Hungary were highly literate, with their rate of literacy rising as emigration from their homeland grew. An official report on the literacy rates of nationalities leaving Hungary recorded the following percentages: 88.6 for Hungarians, 76 for Slovaks, 65 for Rumanians, 63.9 for Croat-Slovenes, and 46.6 for Ruthenians.

The overwhelming factor affecting the degree to which Hungarian immigrants were ready to adapt themselves to Americans and their ways was the fact that a large majority of them, coming from social classes struggling to make a living in Hungary, particularly the peasants constituting the greater portion of the emigration wave, did not plan to leave their native land permanently; they intended, instead, to use their time in America to save as much of their wages as possible to remove barriers to a good life for themselves and their families in the old country, some by purchasing the expensive tools needed for success as an artisan, some by establishing a small business of some kind, others by building a house, but most of them by buying land to escape the hard life of a smallholder or agricultural day laborer. Consequently, most of them—some say as many as 80 percent—even many of those who brought their families with them, were actually sojourners, or, as they were called at the time, “Ameri-

can birds of passage,” who undertook the hazardous quest in an alien environment at work which they had not performed previously in the expectation that within two or three years at the most, they would build the financial base needed to fulfill their dreams of economic security and social welfare in the familiar setting of Hungarian values and cultural traditions, perhaps seldom, if ever, especially during the early years of their sojourn, giving much thought to the possibility that they would never live in their homeland again.

The composition of the Hungarian immigrant population and the widely held intention to stay in America only long enough to accumulate savings for use back home had an enormous impact on the kind of life most Hungarians followed in America. These two factors meant that they would seek work in the mines and industries of America, with only about one percent desiring employment as agricultural day laborers. As a consequence, they competed for jobs with other segments of the new immigration and also with a very mobile work force of native-born Americans, many of whom were migrating to industrial centers, driven by the mechanization of agriculture and by successive depressions in the agricultural economy near the end of the century. And as sojourners, they tended to move easily from place to place, often in groups for cultural security. With the help of rumors and of notices about job opportunities appearing regularly in American-Hungarian newspapers, they readily moved to whatever locality promised better pay than the ones they held or had lost, shifting often from one kind of employment to another and willing to toil at the most arduous and dangerous jobs to hasten their return home. This strong tendency to wander from place to place and the large turnover it produced in the population of Hungarian communities presented serious obstacles to the founding of solid Hungarian settlements. When added to the vast geographical area over which Hungarians—small in number relative to some other segments of the new immigration—dispersed themselves in quest of their dreams, the addiction to sojourning helps to explain why it was so often difficult for Hungarians to form stable homogeneous communities in whose cultural and social activities and support systems they could regularly participate. Furthermore, the migratory character of so large a portion of the Hungarian immigrant population also meant that large numbers of them lived in Hungarian boardinghouses, where at least they enjoyed cultural support from their own countrymen and with them found relaxation and entertainment in neighborhood saloons. Their sojourning and itinerancy also help to explain, at least in part, why so many of them were not strongly motivated to learn the English language, thus substantially cutting themselves off from American culture and also greatly offending native-born Americans.

began to sing the liturgy of the requiem. Lost in my own thoughts and recollections of his sad death and not paying attention to the cantor's words, I suddenly became aware that he was telling our family history: how so very long ago my parents left the village to seek their fortune in America, raised a family, and were never able to return home, how hard work brought about my father's early death, and how this day his son with his family has come to the village to offer repose for his father's soul. After the mass, we all went to the cemetery to visit the graves of my grandparents and other close relatives to link ourselves with the past reverently, to take deeper root in the family's heritage. The experience there brought home to me how long the span of time I was trying to bridge by filling in missing elements of my life, how futile the attempt was. As our relatives turned to leave the site, I protested that they had not taken us to the grave of my brother Sándor, whose likeness I had seen for the first time in his only surviving photograph just the day before. The heart-wrenching reply brought home to me, as nothing else had before, the ineluctable changes time produces in human lives: "Oh, that's not possible, by now he is too far down."

And so the plan for a collection of documents was born. On one occasion near the completion of the Hungarian version, I shared the uncut manuscript with my mother, who always took great pride in her Hungarian origin and, never having learned English, tremendous delight in a granddaughter who conversed with her fluently in Hungarian. I handed the manuscript to her and awaited her reaction expectantly. In her one-hundredth year at the time, in a nursing home by then, and barely able to see, she cradled and weighed the mammoth draft with her arms, and said in seeming disbelief: "Is all this about us?" I answered: "Yes, and it's going to be published in Budapest in Hungarian. It's my way of taking you and my beloved father back home." Always stoical, she wept silently. And so did I.