

Preface

In his final public lectures, the late Chaim Potok began by reminding his audience that "each and every one of us is born into a small and particular world." *Hungarian American Toledo* is about one such world—the Hungarian ethnic neighborhood in Toledo, Ohio. Named for the great industrial center in the English midlands, Toledo's Birmingham neighborhood began to develop in the 1890s with the steel, copper, and shipbuilding industries that thrived on the east bank of the Maumee River.

Now, more than a hundred years later, Birmingham's heyday is over—the marching bands have disbanded and one no longer hears Hungarian spoken on every street corner. Toledo even decided a sign was needed to inform outsiders that they are entering the "Birmingham Ethnic Neighborhood."

Yet, unlike the other once-vibrant Toledo neighbor-

hoods of German and Irish immigrants, Birmingham continues to maintain strong community cohesion. Even those who no longer live there remain loyal, returning regularly for festivals, weddings, church services, and often just to drive around the old streets and recapture it in their memories.

Our aim in *Hungarian American Toledo* has been to bring together the best research that has been done on this important ethnic American neighborhood. Our overall goal is to answer the seemingly simple question—what was it like to be born, grow up, and live in the Birmingham neighborhood?

The question was initially taken up in *Roots in Birmingham*, a locally published volume of oral histories collected by John Ahern in 1997. Realizing that a substantial body of research and writing existed about the neighborhood, we concluded that adapting these more scholarly materials would make a good fit with the grass-roots views presented by the oral histories of *Roots in Birmingham*. The

publication of this volume makes the Birmingham community available to readers “inside and out.”

There is no single methodology in *Hungarian American Toledo*; the reader won't find the word “deconstruction” on any of its pages or any monolithic theory of ethnicity espoused by the authors. Nor were the essays selected for their theoretical underpinnings. Rather, we have attempted to assemble a composite view of Birmingham, a collage rather than a diagram, time-line, or cultural model.

The introduction is written by the editors with input from Andrew Ludanyi, a historian at Ohio Northern University who has studied Birmingham for many years. It is also based on data from Yolanda Danyi Szuch's locally published *History of St. Stephen's Church*. We wanted to give an omniscient narrator's tour of the territory, a bird's eye overview. While social historians have long argued that such “history from the top down” is inadequate to understanding a time and place, we feel that it is a necessary beginning for a full grasp of the subsequent essays.

Hungarian American Toledo includes works by scholars and writers who have studied the Birmingham neighborhood from various perspectives: architectural, folkloristic, theatrical, historical, sociological, and photographic. Each essay features some aspect of the neighborhood in detail. We are especially pleased to include the late Raymond Pentzell's article on the Abauj Betlehemes játék folk play because this thorough revision of his original article was his last work before his untimely death in 1996. We are also pleased to include an account of a 56er, one of the brave immigrants who made their way to Toledo after the failed Hungarian Revolt of 1956.

We hope this collage of perspectives and methods will bring the Birmingham experience to life for readers. The problem confronting such a project, of course, is that the past is not just words and pictures; it is a fleeting reality that passes once and can never be fully captured in a book. Yet words, ideas, and pictures are the only tools we have. We hope that those who know and love Birmingham

will recognize it in these pages and that those who do not will be able at least to get a better glimpse of this "small and particular" American place.

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Many people and organizations supported and encouraged the publication of *Hungarian American Toledo*. We want to thank the authors who contributed their outstanding work; the members of the University of Toledo Humanities Institute's Senior Fellows Seminar who helped us think our way to the volume's current form; Dr. Patrick McGuire, director of the UT Urban Affairs Center, who believed in our project from the beginning and put resources behind it; Molly Schiever Behrmann, whose creative design skills and editor's eye have made a handsome as well as readable book; The Toledo Lucas-County Public Library and its board for its strong support of the Birmingham Cultural Center, and William Puskas, Jr. and the Hungarian Reformed Federation of America, who provided grant support for research and publication preparation costs.