

Searching for Land: The First Hungarian Influx into Canada

Martin L. Kovács

It is a well-established fact that the first groups of Hungarian immigrants to the Canadian West¹ came from south of the border, where they had found employment and often spent several years working in coal mines, foundries, and factories mainly in Pennsylvania. In this context, the question arises as to what compelling reasons had prompted these people to leave their jobs in the United States and undertake the strain and expenses of a transfer to the west of Canada. The study of the newspapers from the mining areas in the eastern United States reveals the main characteristics of an economy free in the extreme from social and safety legislation of any kind. In conformity with the leading ideas of the age the American business magnates firmly believed that their task was practically exhausted in the achievement of the greatest possible profit and that it was up to the individual worker to protect and represent his interests as best he could. Consequently, what we would nowadays call industrial disputes were the order of the day. In the ensuing strikes and violence the Eastern and Central European immigrants, including, of course, the Hungarians, were usually thrown in between the two warring camps of the workers and the employers. As a rule, it was the immigrants who had to bear the brunt of any fight. Thus the employers could use newly arrived immigrants to become strike breakers and force a settlement with the strikers. On the other hand, it was not unusual for the trade unions to utilize immigrant miners or factory workers as shock troops against sheriffs and suffer severe losses when shooting occurred. As to job opportunities, the inexperienced and untrained immigrant, often illiterate and usually without any command of English, was last to be employed and first to be dismissed particularly during times of economic recession or depression. Moreover, owing to the same qualities it seemed natural for him to receive the most dangerous and therefore least desirable assignments in factories, foundries or underground in the mines. Yet in view of such circumstances, it would have been cheaper, if not more humanitarian, to employ persons with skill and greater com-

mand of English, and thus reduce the likelihood of accidents. Nonetheless, reports abound in the press about minor and even major industrial calamities also in later years. Such items were reported regularly and in detail by the American Hungarian press. By the late 1890s the *Amerikai Nemzetőr* (*American National Guard*) and afterwards the *Szabadság* (*Liberty*) were the principal distributors of news among Hungarians in America. The American Hungarian press supplied the newspapers of Hungary with source material concerning industrial accidents in the eastern United States. Such information was not only published in many newspapers of Hungary, but often received editorial comment as well. The main motive behind this approach lay in the government's desire to counteract success stories continually arriving from overseas, and to discredit and undermine the immigration movement as a whole. Whatever their original intentions, such reports serve to show some darker aspects of the life of Hungarian immigrants in America and present instances, in their midst, of alienation of varying severity.

A single issue of a newspaper contained accounts of industrial accidents and other mishaps symptomatic of alienation during an apparently brief period of the summer of 1895. Thus, owing to the cracking of a blast furnace at the Carnegie Steel Works at Braddock, Pennsylvania, nine workers lost their lives and sixteen were wounded; except for the foreman, all were Hungarians. In an explosion at the Cornwall mines near Lebanon another Hungarian worker was hit by a piece of iron which broke his ribs, killing him. At Scranton, András Kruni's right leg was amputated after its having been crushed by a cart in the Jessup coal mine. At Wilkesbarre a Hungarian miner was buried by coal and perished of severe lacerations. A Hungarian factory hand at the National Sugar Refinery, Yonkers, was pulled by his apron into a machine and later expired in the hospital bed. Fear of illness and abject poverty prompted two Hungarians to end their lives with revolver shots.²

Worries of various kinds, cares, tensions and perhaps the very fact of migration, often proved too nerve-racking. Thus an immigrant, upon reaching the border of Hungary, turned violently insane and had to be removed from the train.³ Apparently little change was seen in this respect as time went by. A letter written by a Hungarian immigrant in America and published by the Hungarian newspaper reports

... seldom is the day that a dozen or fourteen men should not be killed by the iron and the Americans only laugh that yet another Hunky is finished. There is enough men, one couldn't see so many maimed persons even in a war as in America, whose hand or leg has been cut off by the iron. . . . The American is very angry because Hungarian and other immigrants come, because he cannot make a living due to him. Besides,

the poor Hungarian is despised and cannot very well get a job since they cannot talk with him.⁴

Not much improvement could be noticed, despite the passage of years, in the way of life of the coal miners either. According to a report in 1903 the working time of coal miners underground lasted from five in the morning until seven at night. This would prevent them from seeing the sun at all for weeks on end. In the opinion of the writer of the report, every Hungarian immigrating to America would do well to tell his relatives: "I'm kissing you for the last time, I'm hugging you for the last time, I shall be gone forever — since I don't know whether I will ever return alive from the coal mines."⁵ Apparently one of the worst years on record, in respect to economic development, occurred in 1907 and 1908. Beginning in the middle of 1907, the United States coal and steel industries were hit by an extremely severe depression. In consequence, thousands of workers were dismissed and lost their bread. Also, 1907 witnessed one of the most tragic disasters in the history of mining, at Jacob's Creek near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on December 19. According to an article in a Hungarian newspaper this particular mine was known to have an extremely bad safety record; a great many workers had been killed in various accidents there, including more than one hundred miners. In the current disaster 315 men including 110 Hungarians were reported to have lost their lives. The journalist was moved to make the following comments:

This new world is very strange. Everything is greedy here. . . . Even the earth. . . . It wants the life of that despised foreigner. . . . The stay of the derided and ridiculed Hungarian in the bowels of the earth is nothing but struggle and agony. He earns a few cents for himself and accumulates heaps of money for the mining companies. All this is not enough. He must throw in his body as well, as sacrifice for the interior of the earth. Let also the body be reduced to carbon . . . so that the coal for sale might be augmented with charred bodies.⁶

The receiving society's feeling of superiority and general attitude to "foreign" immigrants were clearly and outspokenly indicated through labelling certain groups with mocking nicknames. The most frequent such name used in reference to Hungarians was the word *Hunky*. It is not quite clear whether the word had derived as an abbreviation of the word 'Hungarian' or come from the name of the ancient horse-riding nomadic tribe of the Huns. The adjective Hun has become very pejorative since its unfortunate use by the Emperor of Germany in connection with the Boxer Rebellion in 1900–1901.⁷ Nevertheless, some of its deprecating implications might have been anticipated in the older nickname *Hunky*. In any case, Hungarians of the time felt hurt and degraded

through its use and complained bitterly about it. What kind of adverse value judgment contemporaries felt the sobriquet contained can be seen from this particular newspaper story:

The ignorant foreign worker is driven by the hundred into the mine infiltrated with gas and thousand other dangers — and none of them will come back. Will the public opinion be upset? Oh no! . . . What does it matter, they are only Hunkies. — In the city of Gary a certain Andras Ribar who was singing in the street in Hungarian during the night was shot dead by a policeman. . . . The mayor of the city of Gary felt prompted to say . . . “Andras Ribar who has been killed was not a man but only a Hunky.”⁸

Towards the end of 1910 the *Szabadság* (the Hungarian language newspaper of America) strikingly summarized the labour safety position in a large cartoon on its front page. Healthy muscular young workers are seen to march into a factory through its right-hand entrance; through the exit on the left a large group of cripples, one-legged and on crutches, and elderly are trudging outside. These victims of the factory are led by a legless man placed on a hand-cart propelling himself with his hands.⁹

At that stage very little, if any, financial or other assistance was available for those workers who were permanently or partly incapacitated. Thus, some of them could find only one solution for their troubles at the final stage of alienation, in the form of suicide.

An ex-peasant from the Nyírség, for two years a miner, found a particularly gruesome way to demonstrate his despair over the fact that he could not obtain work owing to an illness. While at work in the mine he had apparently put aside a stick of dynamite which he now placed in his mouth and detonated. The pieces of his body had to be collected within a circle some thirty feet in diameter and they were buried in the midst of the great and understandable sympathy of his Hungarian fellow workers.¹⁰

The traumatic experiences of Hungarian peasants in American factories and mines have filtered through into folksongs and poetry as well. The songs sung on the shores of the Huron and the Erie are at the same time interesting specimens of how English language elements have penetrated the American Hungarian language:

A letter went from America somewhere [in Hungary]
It is so sad that even its seal shows mourning
My dear mother do not weep for me, it is all in vain.
It's a small matter, only one miner will be missing from the mine.¹¹

The other folksong holds up the lack of interest which Francis Joseph, the Emperor and King of Austria-Hungary, was supposed to have felt towards the problem of emigration in Hungary.

Francis Joseph is travelling in the direction of Eger.
Three 'bodies' are leaving for the new country.
Francis Joseph is asking them what is new?
"The taxes are too high, the country cannot bear them."¹²

A poem, published in the *Canadai Magyar Farmer* (Canadian Hungarian Farmer) under the neutral sounding title of *A Hunok* (The Huns), deals in an epic manner with the suffering and accidents of Hungarian peasants as foundry workers. At the same time, it reflects the identity crisis felt owing to a clash between the folk pride felt about the supposed Hungarian-Hun relationship maintained in many legends of the peasants as well as in medieval chronicles, and the poor American image of the Huns.

Migration has eternally continued on this earth . . .
Atilla's late descendants have set out to move,
They, the disloyal degenerate offspring, the helpless weaklings,
Who are taunted as *Huns* by the people of America,
Keep on toiling in terrible drudgery day and night
Where the poisonous fumes of the fire are densest.
There the Huns are pushed by members of hostile races,
The Huns, the despised offspring of the great Hunnish army
Of whom their ancestors had been once in deadly fear.
Who would stand up for them, they who are alone;
They, the toilers designated for death by flames!
Their lean bony faces glow in the fierce glare,
Contempt of deadly danger glitters in the eyes of each.
The ardour by which the world had been subjugated once upon a time,
Once again flares up in the degenerate progeny.
Woe is him, who turns dizzy even for a moment;
He will vanish without a trace from this planet.
Not even dust will be left in the hungry blast furnace,
The red-hot radiation will not even be dimmed.
Another hand will take his place in no time.
Who cares! The offspring of the Huns are a dying race.
They do not possess a brother in this world.
Also their glory now amounts to nothing, but a fairy tale and dream!
He who is not reduced to ashes, will lose his leg,
His hard-working arms, or the sight of his eyes.
And then . . . that the grotesque sufferers cannot be seen,
They are transferred to a distant island.
There they will be extinguished slowly and forgotten,
The destitute regiment of the poor *quasi* Huns.¹³

The poem appears to have been composed on the basis of the romantic Hun-Magyar kinship often stressed in folk legends, and it contains a definite message about the sorry fate of many a peasant factory-hand of the time. Besides, a clear doubt is expressed about the future of pre-1914

Hungary and latent fear concerning the chances of survival of Hungarians as a nation.

A newspaper item in Hungary written by a Hungarian visitor to America, provides a less sentimental and more realistic evaluation of Magyars as workers. In the opinion of this observer the fact that the Hungarian is a hard worker is acknowledged by the Americans; however, the Hunky is despised owing to his unassuming and simple way of life. They do not seem to approve of his apparent greediness to earn much money within a short time and at any price so that he can return to his native village and purchase land there. Consequently, the Hungarian worker is not very choosy as to work; he is not above becoming a strike breaker in a strike and therefore, the American employer will often resort to pitting Hungarian immigrants against the organized American workers. Since he does not even want to reach the American standard of wages, he is likely to keep down the level of wages. The writer of the article found that most Hungarian immigrants employed in the mines in iron and steel foundries were subject to dismissal without notice, since no legislation existed protecting the worker, or if it did, it was not carried out. No concern was shown towards the life and bodily health of the individual since everyone was expected to look after himself. "In this respect the American employer is ruthless and merciless."¹⁴

Under these circumstances it is not surprising that Peter Németh should have contrasted the positions of Hungarian workers in Canada to those of their fellow-countrymen in the contemporary United States. He did this pointedly in the *Amerikai Magyar Népszava* (*American Hungarian People's Voice*):

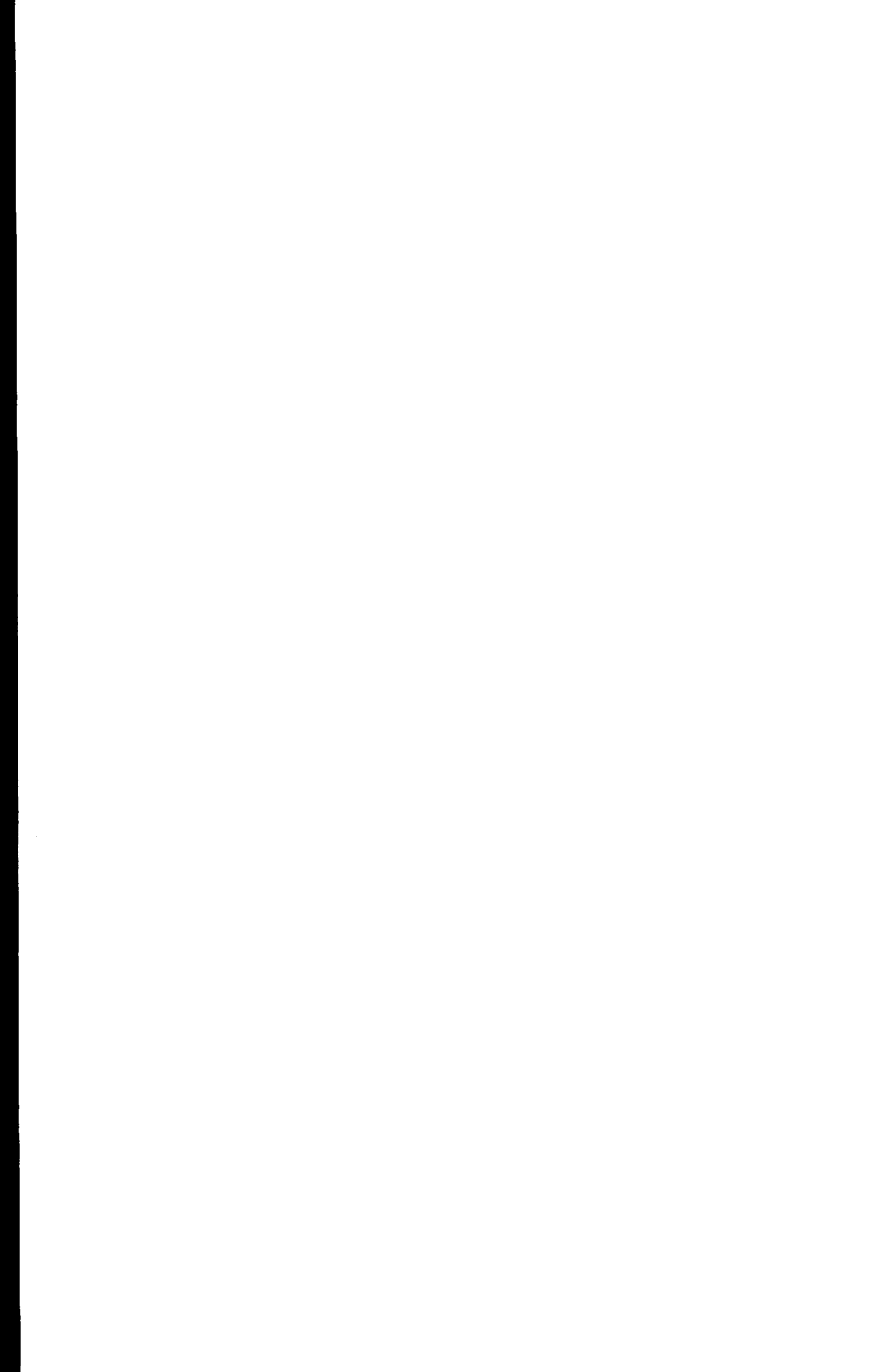
... here in Canada Hungarians are respected and honoured. ... Things and persons called Hungarian are synonymous with "best." This claim sounds almost incredible when we Hungarians living here in a strange world have been accustomed to being degraded and disparaged every now and then and to being called Hunkies.¹⁵

No doubt in addition to the attraction of land, to the possibility of returning to farming, their ancestral occupation, this quiet appreciation — north of the border — of the person and personality of the Hungarian immigrant was a factor in persuading him to settle on the Canadian prairie.

NOTES

1. For further information with respect to emigration from Hungary and immigration to English-speaking America, see M. L. Kovacs, "Aspects of Hungarian

- Peasant Emigration from Pre-1914 Hungary," in I. Volgyes, ed., *The Peasantry of Eastern Europe*, 2 vols. (New York, 1979), I, pp. 119–132.
2. *Felsőmagyarország* ['Upper Hungary'], August 28, 1895.
 3. Mihály Karakó, of Kenézlő, Szabolcs, since no proper medical facilities were available at Csacza, the famous border crossing place where several hundred thousand emigrants passed on their way to America, had to be placed under police arrest for his own sake. *Nyirvidék* ['Nyir Area'], March 23, 1902.
 4. *Nyirvidék*, April 27, 1902.
 5. *Nyirvidék*, March 22, 1903.
 6. *Resicai Lapok* ['Resica News'], January 16, 1908. The reporter, of course, is indulging in rhetorics when generalizing without restraint: "America is now in our eyes a country of misery and horror."
 7. References to the episode, often only partly accurate also with respect to the Huns, have circulated widely, as, for instance: "*Huns* . . . the barbarous race of Tartar origin, invading Italy under Attila, the Scourge of God, A.D. 451–53. Name applied to and claimed by the modern Germans. Derived from the ex-Kaiser's advising the German troops sent to China in 1900 to act like the Huns under Attila." Charles Annandale, *Home Study Dictionary* (London, n.d.), 355.
 8. *Resicai Lapok*, July 15, 1909.
 9. *Szabadság* ['Liberty'], October 31, 1910.
 10. *Nagykároly es Érmellék* [places in eastern Hungary], March 18, 1911.
 11. *Resicai Lapok*, January 14, 1912. The Magyarized English words in the Hungarian text: 'majner' = miner; 'majna' = mine.
 12. *Resicai Lapok*, January 4, 1912. *Eger*: a city in Heves County in northeastern Hungary. 'Bodi' (body) seems to have been taken over from the practice of counting how many 'bodies' have entered or left the shafts and underground.
 13. *Canadian Hungarian Farmer*, November 15, 1913.
 14. *Temesvári Hírlap* ['Temesvár News'], January 4, 1913.
 15. Péter Németh, "The Canadian Hungarian Farmsteads" [A Kanadai magyar tanyák], in Géza D. Berkó, ed., *The Festive Album of the Canadian Hungarian People's Voice Jubilee, 1899-1909* (New York, 1910), 79. Péter Németh was a very recent immigrant at that stage from the United States and, as a journalist, had a reasonably good grasp of the life and social status of the Hungarians there. Nevertheless, the fact that, for several decades, a "war" for immigrants had been going on between the two otherwise friendly countries must not be lost from sight. On top of that, Németh's newspaper, the *Kanadai Magyarorság* (*Canadian Hungarians*), later *Kanadai Magyar Farmer* (*Canadian Hungarian Farmer*), heavily depended on government support. Yet the self-employment and relative independence of the farmers of the later peasant communities on the Canadian prairie were to justify many of the early expectations. Cf. Kovacs, "Aspects of Hungarian Peasant Emigration . . .," pp. 121–123.



Aspects of Hungarian Settlement in Central Canada, 1921-1931

N. F. Dreisziger

In many respects the history of Canada's Central and East European ethnic groups is an unexplored field. This is especially true in the case of Hungarian Canadians. Aside from the work of Professor M. L. Kovacs on the Saskatchewan settlements, and a sociological study by the late John Kosa on some one hundred Ontario families, no professional scholar so far has done research on the history of these people.¹ No substantial work has been undertaken, for example, on their largest settlements, the Hungarian neighbourhoods of Central Canada's big cities.² This paper is a part of a larger effort to fill in this great gap in Hungarian Canadian historiography, mainly dealing with a critical period, the 1920s, when the most significant growth in Hungarian immigration took place, and when Central Canada's largest Magyar "ghettos" emerged in Toronto and Montreal. Besides offering some statistical information on the subject, the author will try to find out the contributions by various factors to the bringing about of the same. By doing so, we hope to make some progress towards answering the question, why immigrants flocked to the cities just at that time, in clear contradiction to Canada's "officially stated immigration policy . . . 'Only Farmers Need Apply.'"³

According to the 1971 census, 131,890 people of Hungarian origin lived in Canada. In this context, the census records reveal two important characteristics. First, it was a highly urbanized group; second, its core was to be found in Central Canada. According to the official statistics, 81 percent of Hungarians resided in cities, compared with only 76 percent of Canada's population as a whole. Only nine percent of Hungarian Canadians were referred to as farm residents. The census also shows that almost 60 percent of Hungarians lived in Central Canada, mainly in Ontario.⁴

The picture presented in the 1971 figures sharply contrasts with the group's distribution during the early part of this century, their formative period in Canada. Detailed figures exist only for 1921 and they list 13,181 Hungarians. Of these, only about one ninth lived in cities with