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**The Broken Crown:  
Reappraisals of Hungarian Identity  
in the Interwar Years**

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## Trianon and its Aftermath

At the outset of the peace negotiations in Paris, the mood in Hungary was apprehensive, but not dejected. Aurél Kárpáti summed up the prevailing attitude with customary Hungarian literary panache:

„Paris, city of sacred dreams” - are you now going to take your leave of us, are we now going to bid you farewell deprived of hope, with a heart pounded to death, or shall we greet a friend reconciled with sincere warmth? For many a long decade you have lived in the devotions of young Hungarians as the inexhaustible emporium of unattainably beautiful and sublime desires and concepts to form a new world, from whose riches this son of the chaotic and crestfallen East awaits his salvation whilst thirsting for the West. Dreams nurtured in secret and yearnings derided on many an occasion made you grow into an enigmatic symbol in the souls of poets searching for „the songs of a new era” and now an entire country, the Republic of Hungary, risen again from its ashes, is turning towards you filled with hope and trust: will the dreams of the poets be borne out by reality?

Hungarians are going to Paris, the representatives of an orphaned and maltreated people, not for the sake of dreams, not with eyes clouded by mirages, not with the sweet eloquence of poets, but with the faith of the Hungarian fate and the Hungarian future, with the dispassionate weighing up of reality and with the strength of truth in their words. Once again Hungarians are going to *Paris, the Hungarians of the revolution to the Mecca of revolutions*, so that they might give evidence concerning our truth, that they might bear witness to it: that the Hungarian people who took the gospel of Wilson seriously have as much right to a free existence as the Czech, Slovak, Romanian or Serb peoples and that those whom destiny has placed in charge of the scales of justice by chance or good fortune cannot apply double standards”<sup>1</sup>.

The progressive journalist Zoltán Szász recognised the merits of making allowances for minority aspirations:

„Wilson’s points are nothing other than the crystallisation in political form of justice and of the innate moral sentiment within the soul of every healthy human being”<sup>2</sup>.

His vision of what lay in store for the country was tinged with gloom. Hungary would sow what it had reaped by failing to confront its multi-ethnic nature and turning a deaf ear to the demands of its subject peoples:

„One of the primary causes of the World War amongst the many was the surprising ignorance on the part of the Hungarian ruling class and the army of politicians drafted from its ranks not merely of the rules to which social life conforms, in other words of the foundations of all serious politics, but specifically of all manner of historical, geographical, ethnographical, economic, cultural and other circumstances in Hungary in general. These people who held

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<sup>1</sup> Aurél Kárpáti, Déli Hírlap, 8 December, 1918, quoted in *Álmok és Tények. Magyar írók a demokráciáról és a nemzeti kérdéstről a monarchia felbomlása idején*. Edited by Farkas József, Argumentum kiadó, Budapest, 2001, p153, emphasis in the original.

<sup>2</sup> In *Világ*, 8 December 1918. Ibid, p155.

power in Hungary did not in fact know the country. And every last one of the Hungarians, principally the Hungarian intellectuals, whose ways of thinking and feeling were developed by schools and a press, which bore the indelible imprint of the ignorance and bad faith of that ruling class, were also ignorant of Hungary. Prior to the war who was familiar with the proposition so startling in its simplicity and yet so significant that Hungary was not a country populated exclusively by Hungarians?"<sup>3</sup>.

Thus the question of national minorities had been suppressed with Freudian aplomb and was about to surface with a vengeance and ferocity that no Hungarian could have envisaged. Szász, however, did not believe in answering the rapacious demands of the Romanians, Slovaks and Serbs with equally rapacious counter-claims, nor did he deem it prudent to retaliate for the falsified statistics with equally inaccurate and exaggerated figures, but that the correct response should be to recommend a plebiscite with guarantees of a secret ballot and neutral supervision. He reminded his readers that one of the most positive arguments encapsulated in Wilson's approach was that the peace of the future could not be the product of base haggling, but the fruit of a sober application of principles. If these were implemented with consistency and honesty then, in the struggle to come, even if Hungary did not emerge triumphant, at least it could expect to score a success<sup>4</sup>.

Szász also rejected the notion of putting Hungary's case in terms of the traditional justifications of Hungarian supremacy within its domains:

„Old, pre-revolution Hungary was one of the states and societies most prone to showing off. It mainly delighted in flaunting its historical past and alleged political calling at every step of the way. Thousand-year Hungary, state-forming nation. The empire of Saint István and a handful of similar slogans made up the heady brew that the Hungarian so-called intellectuals under the spell of constitutional lawyers and national historians stupefied themselves with. That these thousand years are not some kind of exceptional rarity and that moreover the significance of our having been the state-forming nation is reduced anyway due to the recurrent loss of national independence puts us in a bad light in the eyes of the world these days, making us appear hateful rather than sympathetic and making the doctrine of the crown of Saint István seem like the outflow of a laboured fetishism... [...] ...our propensity to parade and glorify our greatness throughout history should not remotely feature in our behaviour at the peace negotiations. If we wish to justify the necessity and rightfulness of the unity of the territory making up today's Hungary by saying that Hungary has been here for a thousand years then we have grounds for fearing that Wilson's reply will be so much the worse since oppression dates back that far as the ruler of a 150-year old state will not be impressed by the thousand years. For this reason it would be preferable to avoid reference to any historical claim and fight for the country's integrity from a geopolitical, economic and cultural point of view, pointing not to the Hungary of the past founded on oligarchic national and class oppression, but to the Hungary of the present that recognises the right to self-determination of the peoples and wishes to create freedom and culture"<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pp156-7.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pp156-7.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pp157-8.

Two months later, Aladár Schöpflin, Hungary's greatest literary critic, in an article entitled „The Eternally Hungarian” articulated the growing fears about the future fuelled by insatiable Romanian and Slovak demands and the chaos in Northern Hungary and Transylvania:

„Since it became certain that we had lost the war, a great many of us Hungarians do not dare look the map of Hungary. It was such a beautiful little patch on the map of Europe, its shape was so dear to our eyes, so familiar, we had grown so accustomed to it since the days of our childhood, it had become so much a part of our thoughts that we could never believe that it would ever be different. And if we trace out with our eyes the shape of the Hungary to be, as our neighbours and perhaps also their Western supporters would have it, the image so offends our eyes that we cannot even bear to look at it. No matter what befalls us, those of us alive today will never again grow accustomed to these new contours on the map, the old Hungary of a thousand years will always be engraved on our hearts with its exquisite, regular heart-shaped outline, which we can describe as having been traced out by nature itself, the heart of Europe between the Carpathians and the Danube. And the blood quietly and ceaselessly drips from our hearts no matter what we are doing, what we are occupied with or what we are thinking of - even in our dreams the oppressive, impotent feelings of pain weigh heavily on our souls.

Yet we are in Budapest in that part of the country which will remain in Hungary come what may, which will be sovereign, a free state whose people are not ruled by another, foreign power, but there are millions of Hungarians whose fate is a thousand times worse, for whom the terrible anxiety, which wrings our hearts, is already a tangible everyday reality and who are already ruled by the whip of the conqueror. Our distress is mere child's play compared to the bitterness of the Hungarians dwelling in the occupied territories [...]. Hostile soldiers filled with the arrogance of victory have them under their sway, determining every detail of their lives with stringent rules, smothering, mercilessly punishing every manifestation of their emotions, basely torturing them, interfering in their private affairs and swiftly and drastically altering the Hungarian exterior of cities that has been in place for a thousand years. They brutally keep them cut off from what remains of Hungary so that they will not find out about what is happening over here, letters and newspapers do not reach them from the Hungarian homeland, father cannot contact son, sibling cannot get in touch with sibling, uncertain rumours flood in from all sides. The conquerors are doing everything they can to ensure that the feeling of having been annexed even at this stage where annexation is not yet a fact will etch itself into the consciousness of our brothers and sisters, all the measures they adopt create the impression that the current state of play is already final, unchangeable and that all hopes to the contrary are in vain and they are doing everything they can to extinguish even the wish to belong to us from our brothers and sisters [...]

They have no means of convincing themselves that our hearts ache for them so much that we cannot take a sip of a drink, chew a morsel of bread without its taste turning bitter at the very thought of them, that we share the feelings of humiliation, impotent rage, that we too flail about in the hell of woeful despondency.

It is, however, more necessary than ever before to be as one in thoughts and feelings. Regardless of what happens to Hungary, one thing has to remain: the affective unity of all Hungarians. If we cannot save the country in its thousand-year old form from the great catastrophe we have to save the nation. Even if their homeland is torn apart, Hungarians must remain as one. Hungarian culture cannot be ripped to pieces and snatched away from us: it remains ours forever. Greed, the thirst for revenge and ignorance can do whatever they like with the country, the nation shall remain as one and shall be indivisible. No matter what they do to us, Hungarians shall hold hands with Hungarians across frontiers and artificial dividing

lines and shall stick together in spirit and in truth. The soul of the eternal Hungarian will forever hover above the ruins of old Hungary”<sup>6</sup>.

Albert Apponyi presented the Hungarian reply to the conditions presented at the peace conference on 16 January 1920. Quickly dispensing with the preliminaries, he stated that they were unacceptable without substantial modification. The settlements concluded with Germany, Austria and Bulgaria were as rigorous as that proposed for Hungary and yet none contained such substantial territorial changes. Hungary would be stripped of two thirds of its surface area and almost as much again of its population and would at the same time be deprived of almost all the preconditions for economic development. The country would lose the bulk of its coal, ore and salt mines, its timber, oil and gas reserves, its labour force and the Alpine pastures vital for its cattle. So Draconian a punishment did not fit the crime and conveniently overlooked the fact that when the war broke out, Hungary was not in possession of full sovereignty. The intention could not be to pass judgement as Hungary had not been granted a hearing and if it were a matter of breaking up „polyglot states” into components more equitably resolving the territorial issue for the national minorities and better guaranteeing their freedoms then the suggested provisions had shot wide of the mark since 35% of the 11 million souls destined to be placed under new rulers were in fact Hungarian. Thus the principles espoused would apply to everyone except the Hungarians, a clear case of discrimination. Not only would the ethnic composition of the successor states be no more homogenous than that of Hungary, but, to make matters worse, it would mean transferring national hegemony to ethnic groups at a lesser stage of cultural development, as illustrated by figures on literacy rates. Whereas 80% of Hungarians were able to read and write, only 33% of Romanians and just under 60% of Serbs could. Similarly, 84% of the Hungarian upper classes had obtained the equivalent of the French baccalaureat or possessed similar qualifications whilst 4% of their Romanian and 1% of their Serbian counterparts had achieved this distinction.

Ample proof of the detrimental effect such a transfer of power could have had been given during the past year when certain of Hungary’s neighbours had taken over the entire apparatus of government in the areas they occupied. Although a separate memorandum had been drafted to provide detailed information, Apponyi mentioned that two universities, in Kolozsvár/Cluj-Napoca and Pozsony/Bratislava had been ruined and the teaching staff driven away. The occupying nations did not have the wherewithal to replace these major cultural institutions. Likewise, in the areas occupied by the Romanians, over 200,000 children were receiving their education in the dust of the roads since Hungarian teachers had been dismissed.

The best means of determining where populations ought to belong would be the consultation implicit in a plebiscite and Apponyi quoted Wilson to hammer the point home. Hungary would abide by the results of such plebiscites for all the territories earmarked for annexation provided that the requisite guarantees for a truly free vote were given. The need for a plebiscite was all the more urgent since the inhabitants of the occupied regions would not be represented in the National Assembly where final responsibility for the acceptance of the terms lay. Morally it could not take the decision on their behalf.

As far as the claim that the rights of national minorities would be better respected in the new states was concerned, Apponyi declared that he did not intend to launch into a defence of Hungary against accusations of oppression, but contented himself with remarking that he and

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<sup>6</sup> Originally published in Vasárnapi újság, 9 February, 1919. Ibid, pp355-357.

his colleagues would be glad indeed if the Hungarians living beyond the new frontiers were to benefit from the same entitlements and advantages as the non-Hungarian speaking citizens of Hungary. Even if the minorities policy in Hungary had been worse than its most vehement enemies maintained it would still be better than the situation facing the hapless Hungarians in the occupied areas.

If the worst-case scenario were to ensue, Apponyi pleaded, then protection of national minorities should be dealt with more thoroughly and be flanked by more effective guarantees. Hungary was willing to abide by such rules for any minorities residing in its territories.

The head of the Hungarian delegation then turned his attention to the wider issues of peace, stability and the reconstruction of Europe, arriving at the conclusion that the problem of Hungary was not a negligible factor in this context. For centuries, Hungary had played an important role in Europe, and particularly in Central Europe, in maintaining peace and security. Prior to the honfoglalás and the conversion of the Hungarians to Christianity there had been no peace and security in the region. Central Europe had been exposed to the ravages of attacks by a wide variety of barbaric hordes. The threat from the East had been countered by Hungary, which became the defensive bastion of the West, a vocation to which it remained true for ten centuries. Its rivers, valleys and mountains formed a perfect geographical unit unique in Europe, which could only be governed by a single power and whose components were economically interdependent, with the centre absorbing and processing the raw materials and resources of the periphery. This organic structure had held the country together throughout history. Creating frontiers would stem the internal migration flows, preventing workers from seeking the most suitable jobs, breaking the traditional ties that had bound the cohabiting nationals together in a shared mentality. Surely the result of such a policy would be to provoke unrest rather than to put a stop to it?<sup>7</sup>

In spite of the carefully reasoned arguments rehearsed and the meticulously documented refutations of falsified statistics presented by the Romanians to bolster their claims the terms of the settlement as signed were disastrous. Excluding Croatia, Hungary shrank from 282,000 square kilometres to 93,000 and its population fell from 18.2 to 7.6 million, a drop of 43%. The largest slice of territory (103,000 square kilometres) with over five million inhabitants was awarded to Romania; then came Czechoslovakia with 61,000 square kilometres and 3.5 million inhabitants. In a particularly intolerable twist of fate Hungary's former overlord, Austria, gained 4,000 square kilometres and almost 300,000 new subjects. Perhaps the most important figures of all relate to the Hungarian minorities. In total they comprised 3.2 million, or 30.2% of the lost population. 1.6 million of them lived in Transylvania and the other territories given to Romania, 1 million in Slovakia and Sub-Carpathia and approximately half a million in Yugoslavia<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Reproduces in full in: *Trianon. A magyar békeküldöttség tevékenysége 1920-ban*. Edited by Magda Ádám and Győző Cholnoky, Lucidus kiadó, Budapest, 2000, pp224 to 232. The summary covers pp224-230. Other valuable material may be found on pp 139 to 212, which contain the Hungarian delegation's analysis of the Transylvanian question, questioning the accuracy of the statistical data furnished by the Romanian side, examining the cultural situation and reviewing history to demonstrate the absence of a properly founded Romanian claim to Transylvania.

<sup>8</sup> Ignác Romsics: *Magyarország története a 20. században*, Osiris kiadó, Budapest, 2000, p145. Hereafter referred to as Romsics. For a more detailed account of the negotiations see also *A trianoni békeszerződés*, Osiris, Budapest, 2001 by the same author.

The Treaty of Trianon proved so traumatic to the Hungarian mind because it quite simply overturned every assumption the nation had held dear concerning its destiny, the basis for its self-definition had been pulled out from under its feet, the loss of a sense of meaning and purpose giving rise to bewilderment, compounding the feelings of isolation that had haunted the Hungarians ever since their arrival in the Carpathian Basin in 896. The punishment inflicted was not proportionate to the sins committed and much soul-searching was engaged in to pinpoint the flaws in character or policy that had lead up to the unparalleled humiliation. Confronting weakness and accepting blame is never a comfortable process and ultimately successive governments preferred to attribute all of Hungary's woes to Trianon itself rather than face up to the need for radical social reforms. As soon as the international climate permitted, official Hungary openly espoused revisionist aims. Against this backdrop, no musing on national character, however indulgent or bizarre, remained neutral. Identity had become politicised, Hungarian essence the binding force making a nonsense of the imposed frontiers separating the minorities from the „anyaország” or „mother country” and fanning the flames of righteous indignation. Dissatisfaction with Trianon, which entered the Hungarian language as a concept with a wealth of negative associations, spawned an entire genre of protest literature, whose popularity has never waned with fresh examples appearing on bookshop shelves even today, and a board game intended for children going by the evocative name of „Let's Get Back Greater Hungary!”.

In 1921, Gyula Kornis, Piarist monk and Secretary of State in the Ministry of Religious and Educational Affairs, drew up a programme outlining the main tasks to be fulfilled by state schools. These included the positive cultivation of national sentiment, the concept of „integer” Hungary, in other words, a Hungary restored to its former glory and expanse, the protection of the vulnerable souls of Hungarian youth against the spirit of internationalism and the re-hungarianisation of the intellectual elite, which involved counteracting its „judaification”. He also called for an end to the tradition in the teaching of history whereby recent events did not feature in the curriculum, demanding instead that the World War, the „so-called proletarian dictatorship”, the Trianon peace settlement and subsequent developments be covered<sup>9</sup>.

Hungarian geography as taught in schools was the geography of Greater Hungary, reflecting the pre-Trianon reality and in 1927 instructions as to the exact content of lessons stipulated that pupils' attention had to be drawn to the important role each region within the Hungarian Basin system and every natural factor played in the life of the nation as a whole. The motive behind this was to demonstrate the indissoluble bond between Hungarian lands and the Hungarian nation, the affinity between each component and the geographical, economic, historical and political unity of the whole. Teachers were to introduce this concept of the undivided Hungarian lands and then compare this with the „dismembered” or „mutilated” remnant<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Romsics, p178.

<sup>10</sup> Romsics, pp178-9.

Indeed teaching in every school began with a short prayer, the so-called „Hungarian Credo”: „I believe in one God, I believe in one homeland, I believe in one divine eternal truth, I believe in Hungary’s resurrection”<sup>11</sup>.

Bálint Hóman, one of the era’s most eminent historians, acted as Minister of Education in the Gömbös and Darányi administrations (1932-1938) moved further towards a hungarocentric approach. In 1934 in conjunction with the introduction of the uniform secondary school, he maintained that the mainstay of a general education, which had to be made into the backbone of secondary teaching, was knowledge of the nation. He later set out in greater detail what this implied:

„It cannot be the aim of even a single Hungarian school to transmit specialised knowledge pure and simple. The primary task of each and every one of them must be purposeful preparation for Hungarian life, the moral education of young people, the consolidation of their character, the development of their sense of duty and the formation of a healthy Hungarian world view founded on religious ethics and national awareness”. The former core subjects of the humanities and natural sciences were replaced by Hungarian language and literature, history and economic and social studies<sup>12</sup>.

In politics one of the most eloquent and famous statements of the Hungarian revisionist stance was made during a speech by István Bethlen, Prime Minister from 1921 to 1931, in Debrecen in 1928. He painted a depressing picture of the extent to which relations between Hungary and the successor states had been poisoned:

„...in 1924 [...] I signed a protocol together with the leaders of neighbouring states, which would have been suitable for creating a normal atmosphere between Hungary and its neighbours. I was confident that this would be attainable on the basis of diligence and a modicum of inventiveness and indeed it would have been attainable if the actions organised in contravention of even those few provisions of the peace treaty, which are to our benefit, had ceased. If the war of extermination being waged against the Hungarian minorities, whose lot is guaranteed by the existence of treaties on the minorities, had stopped; if enforced repatriations, the confiscation of property belonging to Hungarians and the sequestration of their estates and their nationalisation had been discontinued; if the eradication of Hungarian culture had ended and if the campaigns aimed at undermining the good international reputation of the maimed country had been broken off; if those operations, which from time to time caused difficulties purely as an end in themselves even in relation to matters where the interests of our neighbours were really not at stake had stopped; if the undertakings assisting émigrés who had fled abroad by lending them moral support and encouragement in activities directed against Hungary’s domestic policy and sovereignty had been ended.

If all of these had been consigned to the past then we would have seen results long ago and we would have the improved atmosphere, which is something we are not alone in wishing for, but that the leading statesmen of Europe also desire. Fair enough, but they say that this is rendered impossible by the Hungarian irredentist and peace treaty revisionist movements. Let us dwell on this issue for a moment. What is this irredentism, which they were only too happy to avail themselves of before the war when it was wielded against us and which they did not then remotely deem to constitute unseemly behaviour on international scene? What is this

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<sup>11</sup> Romsics, p179.

<sup>12</sup> Romsics, p179.

irredentism, on the basis of which Hungary was broken up and which is quoted as the moral foundation for them to keep hold of the territories awarded to them in the peace treaties?

Is every manifestation of patriotism irredentist? Is it irredentism for someone today in the territory annexed from us to declare himself a Hungarian when he speaks Hungarian, if he wants to send his child to a Hungarian school<sup>13</sup> and resists his being compelled to attend a school where another language is used for teaching or if someone in the territory annexed from us stands up against his property and estates being nationalised or sequestered? Or are we irredentists for addressing these situations and debating these issues in assemblies and the Parliament? Does this make us irredentists? Because the supplementary protocol to the treaty, the minority treaties made the minorities issue into an international issue and placed the League of Nations in the position of adjudicating forum to which anyone, including ourselves, has a right to lodge a complain with concerning the type of circumstances I made reference to a moment ago. If therefore we have a right to complain then we also have a right to examine these issues. Our public opinion constantly does so as it has a historical vocation to monitor whether the Hungarian government is doing its duty in this area.

Or is it irredentism for us to demand a revision of the peace treaty? We actually have two legal claims to justify it. One is clause 19 of the League of Nations Pact contained in the Treaty of Trianon itself, which provides the opportunity for any state to bring the issue of the revision of one or other treaty before the League of Nations. The other is the accompanying letter with which the treaty was handed over and which recognises that if injustices were committed from a national point of view when the frontiers were determined then these would be corrected. We therefore have two claims - and what is more two international claims - to broach these issues and therefore broaching them cannot be construed as irredentism. We certainly preclude any actions, hazardous adventures and conspiracies, but we cannot muzzle the Hungarian public and if the response is that this renders the development of a better atmosphere impossible because we are neglecting to provide a remedy to it, then my reply is to say that there is indeed a remedy to the problem of a better atmosphere, but it not to be found in gagging Hungarian public opinion, but in these circumstances coming to an end!"<sup>14</sup>.

Bethlen himself (and Pál Teleki, fellow nobleman and Prime Minister) had lost virtually all his holdings in Romania, totalling 5,500 hold (or 3135 hectares), leaving him with nothing more than the grounds of his castle following the land reform<sup>15</sup>.

Bethlen was not exactly optimistic about the prospects for lasting peace in the region:

„It is beyond doubt, however, that no definitive guarantee of peace has been provided by the current peace treaties for the point of the Danube Basin on which the Hungarians stand. It is undeniable that the situation in which Central Europe finds itself furnishes good grounds for concern because the atomised great Danubian monarchy was replaced by small national and often not even national[ly homogenous] states, between which permanent disputes and antagonisms reign and which surely do not represent guarantees of a definitive, normal, reassuring peace”<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> in other words a school where the language of teaching is Hungarian.

<sup>14</sup> Bethlen István válogatott politikai írások és beszédek. Edited with a postscript by Ignác Romsics, Osiris kiadó, Budapest, 2000, pp244-5.

<sup>15</sup> Romsics, p188.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p246.

He continued:

„If therefore Europe were to say that we are offering you a definitive peace settlement, but you are declining to accept it in the form we promised, so tell us what you want the definitive peace settlement to look like I would then reply in one sentence: if someone buttons his waistcoat up wrong, he can only set his clothing straight if he unbuttons it and then buttons it up again properly. It is not possible to build a definitive peace on these borders. It is possible to erect a prison on these borders in which we are the captives and the victors are the guards [...] we do not need a revision of the peace settlement, we need different borders”<sup>17</sup>.

Both post-Trianon trauma and the conscious policy of inculcating national values through education had a profound impact on the parameters of thought. Alongside these, radical interpretations of the idea of race took root and became increasingly popular. Post World War Two Hungarian authors were at the least constrained and at the most blinded by the exigencies of legitimating the new order to appreciate the implicit resistance to unbridled anti-Semitic hatred contained in the writings of their predecessors, overlooking their efforts to extend the nation beyond the privileged few to include at least some of its humbler progeny. In Rákosi and Kádár’s brave new world the interwar years were cast as the Dark Ages from which the prophets of Socialism had guided the people towards the Promised Land.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p249.

## Antecedents

In the prologue to his „Concise Guide to Hungarian Literature” of 1895, Zsolt Beöthy penned a hugely influential passage, which served as the prototype for countless later representations, particularly at the celebrations commemorating the thousandth anniversary of the honfoglalás:

„From the darkness of ancient times the figure of a horseman gradually emerges before our eyes as he calmly stands and keeps watch on the steppes in the Volga region. In his pointed fur cap and leopard skin thrown over his shoulder, his muscular lower back seems almost to be joined to his small horse. With eagle eyes he scans the seemingly endless plains, every point of which is brightly lit by the radiant disc of the sun. He is calm, neither afraid nor dreaming, his only concern is what he can see and his eye trained in the distant scenery of the steppes and the strong light clearly discerns everything that the human eye can perceive from one point. His quiver is slung over his shoulder, his Persian sword is at his side; he is keeping a lookout for the enemy. If only a few of them come he will engage them, if they come in a troop he will take the news to the others. He is keeping watch for them and is prepared for anything. He can even see into the distance that is reputed to be boundless, he recognises the soaring eagle in a far off black dot, the swift, strong and ruthless bird of his god. This is a good sign; he strokes the neck of Ráró, his steed, and rests his hand on the hilt of his sword for safety. He is waiting for the future and knows that the common cause will have need of his strength. His soul is filled with the sense of this strength and with devotion to his own kind.

The image of this solitary horseman explains not only a great deal about the way of life of the ancient Hungarians, but also about the essence of the Hungarian spirit”<sup>18</sup>.

This depiction touches upon one of the central preoccupations of Hungarian historians and intellectuals in general, that of Hungarian origins in the East and the extent to which Hungarian identity has adapted to the ideals of Western civilisation, whether abandoning its primitive, yet untainted, nomadic customs was wise, whether Hungary truly belongs to the East or the West.

Two of the most important early accounts of Hungarian origins are the *Gesta Hungarorum* by Anonymous, written during the reign of King Béla the Third (1172-1196), some three hundred years after the events it describes took place and Simon Kézai’s manuscript, the original of which has been lost, produced sometime between 1282 and 1285 as a piece of propaganda on behalf of King László the Fourth, vaunting him as a Christian ruler whose importance can only be rivalled by that of Attila in pagan times<sup>19</sup>.

According to Anonymous the kings of Hungary were descended from the first leader of the Hungarians, Álmos and the Hungarian people once lived in Scythia or Dentü-Mogyer, a vast land stretching all the way to the Black Sea. The inhabitants of Scythia were known as the dentü-mogyer. The first king of Scythia was Magóg, son of Japheth and the name magyar was

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in : Péter Rákos, *Nemzeti jelleg a miénk és a másoké*, Kalligram, Pozsony, 2000, p67.

<sup>19</sup> For this and other information concerning the *raisons d’etat* behind its contents, see László Veszprémy’s postscript on p158 of *Anonymus: A magyarok cselekedetei* and Kézai Simon: *A magyarok cselekedetei*, Osiris kiadó, Budapest, 2001.

given to the nation by him. Attila was descended from him and set off for Pannonia at the head of a huge army, driving out the Romans and taking possession of the land. He then proceeded to build a royal residence in Budavár or, as it was known in German, Ecilburg. Much later, Ügyek, Álmos' father, was born of Magóg's line. Roman historians had described the Scythians as having been wise and placid. They did not till the land, nor did they dwell in houses, but in tents made of felt, lived on a diet of meat, fish, milk and honey and dressed in pelts. Their apparently pacific nature was undermined by years of war and they gradually became so inured to violence that they did not shrink at consuming human flesh and drinking human blood. No emperor ever succeeded in conquering them; indeed they defeated Alexander the Great. They were tall and valiant in battle, skilled in horsemanship and the use of bows and arrows. In spite of the expanses of land Scythia composed, the population expanded so greatly that it proved too small to support such numbers and the leaders of the seven tribes known as hétmagyar decided to seek a new homeland in which to settle. The reason why they became known as Hungarians (hungarusok) is that they were named after the city of Ungvár (Uzsgorod in the Ukraine) where they sojourned after defeating the Slavs and entering Pannonia.

Ügyek's wife, Emese, whilst pregnant with his son Álmos, had a vision of a *turul* bird (the Turkish name for *falco rusticolus altaicus* a totemic bird in the Hungarian tradition due to its rarity)<sup>20</sup>, which impregnated her with the message that her womb was the spring from which a glorious royal line would flow, but that this line would not flourish in the land of her birth. Anonymous attributes her son's name, Álmos, which means drowsy or somnolent in Hungarian, to the fact that the information concerning his future was imparted during a dream, or alternatively to the fact that *almus* in Latin means holy, an allusion to the saints of the later Árpád dynasty.

Following the birth of his own son, Árpád, Álmos and the hétmagyar tribal chieftains (Álmos himself, Előd, Kend, Ond, Tas, Huba and Tétény) followed in the footsteps of Attila to seek out Pannonia where they would be able to thrive. Álmos was elected by his peers of their own free will as their leader and commander in the hope that he would fulfil the promise of Attila's blood. Before embarking on the journey, they swore an oath, opening their veins and mixing their blood in a vessel<sup>21</sup>. This striking image of the *vérszerződés*, the compact of blood, has been reproduced endlessly in every conceivable artistic medium and can rightfully be regarded as the defining moment of Hungarian consciousness in the minds of subsequent generations.

The *Gesta* goes on to chronicle in great detail how Árpád and the chieftains drove out their rivals and conquered all the peoples who stood in their way, Árpád insisting all the way that he was merely reclaiming his rightful inheritance as Attila's descendent. Anonymous is at pains to stress the military prowess of the Hungarians, remarking that in those days they were only inspired by the will to occupy lands, to conquer and to fight, as delighted at the prospect of shedding human blood as if they were leeches<sup>22</sup>.

Kézai's version begins with a rebuttal of the accusations against the Hungarians propagated by Emperor Otto's minions who maintained that their origin was less than exalted. Filimer, son of Aldaricus, king of the Goths took women with him in the army he used to attack the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p54.

<sup>21</sup> For the above, see *ibid*, pp10-14.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p39.

frontiers of Scythia. The charms of these ladies proved something of a distraction to his soldiers and were eventually driven out of the army by order of the royal council whereupon they wandered through the wastelands until they arrived on the shores of Lake Meotis. Having been deprived of the comfort of masculine affections for quite some time they fell prey to the lusts of libidinous devils with the Hungarians as the fruit of these unions<sup>23</sup>.

In Book One, which charts the deeds of the Hungarians up to the collapse of Attila's empire, Kézai traces the „genuine” Hungarian lineage from Japeth, through the giant Menroth who settled in Persia after the destruction of the tower of Babel and begat two sons, Hunor and Magor or Mogor, ancestors of the hun or hungarus people. The polygamous Menroth's other progeny resembled the Huns in appearance, but spoke a different dialect. Since Hunor and Magor were the first-born they lived in separate tents. One day, whilst out hunting, they pursued a hind in the Meotis marshlands until it disappeared, but they decided that the land was eminently suited to livestock keeping and moved there. In the sixth year they decided to travel further and chanced upon the wives and children of the sons of Belar alone in their encampment. Hunor and Magor drove them back to the Meotis marshlands where they took the two daughters of chieftain Dula as wives. All the Huns are descended from these two women.

The Huns were forced to seek new pastures because of their prolific numbers and found a new home in Scythia, which was divided into three parts, Barsatiara, Dentiara and Mogoriara<sup>24</sup>.

Before the Hungarians converted to Christianity, the heralds would muster the Hungarian army by announcing that all men were obliged to gather armed on a given date at a given place to listen to the deliberations and decisions of the assembly. If anyone failed to answer the call and could not give good reasons for so doing, he was put to the sword, outlawed or placed in bondage. Offences and transgressions of this kind were what separated one Hungarian from another, since they were all of identical parentage. The distinction between noble and non-noble therefore sprang from punishment for crimes committed<sup>25</sup>.

A section of the Scythian army departed on a war of conquest, which took them to Pannonia and various other tracts. After vanquishing their enemies, the army dispersed and the Huns proclaimed Etele as their king, who then appointed his brother, Buda, ruler and judge of all the lands between the rivers Tisza and Don<sup>26</sup>.

Having catalogued Etele's conquests, his death and the collapse of his empire, Kézai lists the victories of the returning Hungarians, beginning with those of Árpád, son of Álmos, of the Turul clan whose wealth and armies surpassed those of his fellow captains<sup>27</sup>.

Although the confusion of Huns with Hungarians bears little relation to historical reality, the latter were happy to associate themselves with the „scourge of God” and his marauding hordes, although the fear and loathing Attila sparked in the minds of other Europeans was transferred to the magyars, who were mocked for their barbarism and bloodthirsty tempe-

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, pp89-90.

<sup>24</sup> For the above see *ibid*, pp90-93.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, pp93-94.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, pp94-95.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, pp102-4.

rament. In any event, the colourful stories contained in Anonymous and Kézai's medieval masterpieces have long since passed into the Hungarian Gedankengut and collective consciousness. The true significance of these foundation myths, which lies behind the countless speculations on customs, religion and lifestyle of the seven tribes inspired by them, is that the roots of the Hungarian people were accepted as lying in the East and the implications this was considered to have in terms of defining both national character and determining who belonged and who did not belong to the nation.

## Szekfű: The Worm in the Bud

That answering this and other questions pertaining to Hungarian identity became the most pressing preoccupation of Hungarian intellectuals in the interwar years, that it permeated every other discourse even on ostensibly quite different subjects is illustrated by Gyula Szekfű's „The Spiritual Constitution of the Hungarian Wine Producer” (A magyar bortermelő lelki alkata) from 1922. Szekfű, one of the most influential conservative thinkers in the interwar years, began his study with a criticism of doctrines about the nature of human existence. The most widespread was hostile to the amazing variety of earthly events and, since it could not deny the labyrinth of deeds and actions staring it in the face, looked upon them as a flaw, which it wished to remedy, fired by the unshakeable conviction that it was indeed possible to create order and impose a system on this unmanageable maze, although this had never before been achieved. The power, from which it expected this miracle, bore different names depending on the era and the political leanings of its disciples, whether it be Reason, Liberty, Democracy or Liberalism, or later, Material, Economy or Communism. Beneath the names, the substance of the doctrine remained identical: a force that had swollen to immense proportions, to which its adherents attributed such wide-ranging and complex sphere of authority and unrestricted operation that it defied all earthly constraints to become a transcendental entity, an idol in their eyes. This Force was the sole source of all that was good and beautiful in human history; it was responsible for creating that was desirable. Szekfű perceived in these an unjustified form of causality. On closer scrutiny, the Force, regardless of the label placed upon it, boiled down to nothing more than an ungainly Cause, capable of guiding the infinite variety of human activities independently of any of the motives we were otherwise accustomed to put forward as explanations. The Idol was enigmatic and vaguely defined, doing its work in every part of the globe, in every period of history and exerted its invincible Force on every individual<sup>28</sup>.

The negative side to this belief was its denial and iconoclasm. All other interpretations were invalid and had to prostrate themselves before the Great Cause, since no other had a justification for its existence. The Great Cause was omnipotent and lesser causes contested its absolute dominance, therefore its servants had to ignore all other factors contributing to the unfolding of history, such as emotions, important figures and, since they belonged to the realm of disposition, which could not be regulated by Reason, religion, national and racial sentiment. Doctrinaire Liberalism, for example, was forced to acknowledge that in the Middle Ages one of the chief impulses in people's lives and therefore one of the principle driving forces in medieval history was religion and its response was to account for this by saying that in the darkness of those centuries the truly Great Causes of Reason and Liberty were not yet able to function and that the poor unfortunates who lived through them had no choice but to make do with the only dignified yet meagre substitute for them. In the latter days where the Great Cause reigned supreme, religion had become superfluous<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> Gyula Szekfű: A magyar bortermelő lelki alkata, Minerva Társaság, Budapest, 1922, pp8-9. Henceforward Bortermelő.

<sup>29</sup> Bortermelő, pp9-10.

In assessing agricultural production, beyond the obvious factors such as soil quality and methods of cultivation employed, there was a further consideration, which had been largely neglected in research due to the disdain with which the Great Cause held anything it considered irrational. Szekfű's valuable insight pertained to what he dubbed „the population's inherited racial characteristics”<sup>30</sup>, a phenomenon that could be understood in different ways and was difficult to formulate, and so did not readily lend itself to being reduced to a mathematical formula. Its significance lay in the fact that it deposed the Great Cause, toppling the house of cards that its theory in reality was<sup>31</sup>.

There were no grounds to feel ashamed at failing to come up with an accurate definition of race that would apply everywhere. The problem of race had been sidelined during the last century where liberal science had enjoyed primacy, leaving it in the hands of „one-sided enthusiasts” such as Gobineau, so that the problem could no longer be resolved to everyone's satisfaction. During the last hundred years as a result of freedom of movement and the rapid development of industrial centres and modes of transport, large swathes of the population of Europe had moved to new domiciles amongst new neighbours to the extent that there was scarcely a region where the longer-standing inhabitants did not live side by side with immigrants, newcomers or the descendents of suchlike. Add to this the economic and cultural crises in which Europe had been languishing for decades and which had undermined the individual's sense of solidarity with his fellows and the fact that incomers were not welcomed with open arms, indeed that people were more concerned with erecting partitions to separate themselves from the uninvited guests could be more readily understood, as indeed could the animosity, the hatred founded on the defence of their vital interests with which peoples reacted to the slogans of race. One side, with the aristocratic arrogance of the native, eagerly seeks the attributes and characteristics of its own race and if it finds them - blithely omitting its faults and transgressions - worships them, looking down on outsiders as inferiors, as upstart parvenus, whilst the latter, sensing that they are racially different to those around them and experiencing the unpleasant consequences this brought in its wake, vigorously protest against the racial issue being broached, swearing by the Liberalism that individualises and therefore homogenises everything and denying the existence of racial differences between groups of homo sapiens<sup>32</sup>.

Szekfű felt that these fears are exaggerated because the comprehension of race needed for the purposes of historical research would not provide ammunition for either side to use against the other. In the world of history there was no such creature as a race with exclusively positive traits, nor were there uncultivable races impervious to improvement because in the course of historical development every race had undergone changes, in other words that the more civilised races, which by sheer accident were the product of a longer evolution in more favourable conditions, had absolutely no right to contemplate their more backward fellows with contempt<sup>33</sup>.

Moreover, the differences between races with a historical past were not such that external or anatomical variations could be construed as engendering immanent characteristics as far as their internal constitution was concerned. One glance at the development of European peoples

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<sup>30</sup> Bortermelő, p13.

<sup>31</sup> Bortermelő, pp13-14.

<sup>32</sup> Bortermelő, pp15-16.

<sup>33</sup> Bortermelő, p16.

would suffice to convince the observer of the improbability of such profound, inalterable differences, from which it became obvious that the concept of race required for historical research was, first and foremost, a historical configuration, forged over time and changeable over time rather than an anatomical or psychological one off<sup>34</sup>.

If we concede that race was a historical configuration of this kind, Szekfű continues, then we also have to admit that it is subject to all the factors governing human activity, such as nature, which leaves its imprint on races according to where they settle, as well as cultural and social influences. The latter needed time and a degree of permanence to take effect, as could be seen from assimilation. Physical changes took longer to occur than psychological or spiritual ones and the intense intermixing that had been going on since the 19th century had meant that external differences were confined largely to dress, bearing and habits such as intonation<sup>35</sup>.

Transmissible racial characteristics were not passed down in social classes, guilds and so on, but exclusively within communities such as nations, peoples and tribes. Indeed it was precisely these inherited characteristics, which transformed the communities into peoples or nations. Once again permanence was what set nations and peoples apart from more diffuse groupings<sup>36</sup>. In so far as human development did not take place within a vacuum, but within the framework provided by peoples and nations, it followed that these did not possess any latent, indwelling progressive tendency because racial characteristics, by nature progress-averse, permanent, retrograde and only capable of change over the very long term, formed their very core with all the implications this had for the liberal hypothesis. Consequently, the slightest progress was the fruit not of mass education, the press, administrative instructions or prohibitions or economic compulsion, whose effects remain superficial, but of hard graft, purposeful endeavours and the careful stirring up of sensible qualities whilst deliberately pushing the inertia-encouraging ones into the background<sup>37</sup>.

One of the salient features of economic activity in Hungary was its conservatism and attachment to the principle of continuity, more pronounced than in other nations. The conventional explanation for this was that Hungarians did not trade and indeed could not be persuaded to break with their ingrained dislike of doing business, without the underlying reasons ever having been held up to the light. Indubitably there were cogent economic and social reasons for this, such as there having been no need for the Hungarians to support themselves through trade for centuries or the enforced idleness imposed by the nobility's property rights and privileges, which inhibited the major changes in economic organisation sweeping across the West from reaching Hungary. However, all of these paled into insignificance compared with the role played by the internal, inherited characteristics of the Hungarian race. Their influence could best be uncovered by concentrating on areas of production for which the Hungarians cherished a particular predilection and which could therefore legitimately be looked upon as Hungarian specialities. Szekfű singled out wine production amongst the possible candidates as it was rich in documentary sources stretching back over almost 150 years and because mother nature had suited the entire expanse of the country for wine-growing, especially those regions where the Hungarians - as opposed to the national minorities - had made their homes for centuries. Moreover, the Hungarians had

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<sup>34</sup> Bortermelő, pp16-17.

<sup>35</sup> Bortermelő, pp17-18.

<sup>36</sup> Bortermelő, p19.

<sup>37</sup> Bortermelő, pp20-21.

always enjoyed tending vines; indeed the wine producer's relationship to the object of his toil was a true labour of love. All of this combined meant that the wine producer's spiritual characteristics were visible to the naked eye<sup>38</sup>.

Hungary, located in a moderate climate zone, was blessed with soil that predestined it to become the producer of the highest quality wines and by the 18th century wine-growing had become the third most profitable branch of the economy behind cereals and livestock and was engaged in by every part of the population, irrespective of rank, from the citizen in the town with his grapes through the owners of sprawling estates to the humble serf. A substantial proportion of landowners' income came from wine, with serfs obliged to give ninths to their masters both from the hillside vineyards and from the gardens, which counted as part of the village<sup>39</sup>.

Certain external factors conspired to prevent the Hungarians from selling their nectar beyond the confines of their immediate vicinity, primarily Silesia, Prussia, Vienna, Poland and Wallachia to more profitable markets such as Britain, France and Holland. The most obvious was the distance between Hungary and these countries and the closer proximity of France, Spain, Portugal and the Rhineland whose wines had cornered those markets for centuries. This obstacle could have been overcome, but there were others, which were not readily surmountable. The most important of these was Hungary's relatively weak position within the Habsburg Empire where, between 1526 and 1867 it had virtually no influence on foreign policy, diplomacy or trade issues. From the mid-18th century onwards Maria Theresa's objective of stimulating industry in Austria led to the introduction of protective customs duties levied on foreign goods and the organisation of production in Hungary in such a manner as to allow it to supply the emerging Austrian industries without competing with them. In the War of Succession, most of Silesia was lost and annexed by Prussia, which meant that relations between Prussia and Austria would seal the fate of the huge market for Hungarian wine. Unfortunately these were poisoned by the efforts to nurture Austrian industry. The other traditional export routes were also paralysed by Vienna since part of the programme involved promoting Styrian and Lower Austrian wines. For example, from 1775 Hungarian wines could only be exported via Austria on condition that it was accompanied by a consignment of Austrian wine of equal quantity. Given the poor quality of Austrian wine, however, all that this achieved was to make Hungarian exports grind to a halt. Even after the relevant provision had been abolished, a further measure banned the transport of Hungarian wine to Vienna along the Danube thereby increasing costs exponentially. Similarly, high duties were slapped on Hungarian wines exported to Austria although the same did not apply in reverse. Against all the odds - and in this Szekfü saw conclusive proof of the irrepressible wine-producing energy of the Hungarian soil - by the end of the century Hungarian wine exports still outstripped imports. Perhaps the greatest adversity the Hungarians were made to endure was having the „sour juice” of the Austrian grape foisted upon them, yet in spite of such an outrageous provocation, they did not succeed in modifying or abolishing the Viennese customs system prior to 1848, which would have been the easiest line of defence. Had Hungarian producers wanted to free themselves from Austrian hegemony they ought to have focused on the distribution of quality wines more in keeping with foreign tastes, but they confined themselves to laments in the Parliament. Wine producers drawn for the nobility wrote panegyrics on the splendours of their wares and the excellent production methods.

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<sup>38</sup> Bortermelő, pp24-27.

<sup>39</sup> Bortermelő, pp27-29.

Antal Szirmay penned verses defending the good reputation of Hungarian wine, stressing that his compatriots had nothing to learn on the oenological methods front from abroad, urging them to remain true to their ancient kin and unadulterated wines as it was their Hungarianness to which they owed their prestige. In the cold light of day, however, only tokaji aszu, the „king of wines” was known outside of Hungary and consumed only on special occasions by princes and magnates in minute quantities. Tokaji wine was the customary gift that Hungarian gentlemen offered to their foreign friends and was the only product that in mellow moments of pleasure reminded the West of Hungary’s mere existence<sup>40</sup>.

Ferenc Schams, founder of the only specialised vine nursery, responded to the „most loyal” Hungarian, Count István Széchenyi’s competition to improve national wine production in 1828 by writing a study of the state of play in the branch, followed by a two-volume work with a detailed and professional description of every wine-growing region in the country. In his analysis the loss of foreign markets had not crippled wine production at least in terms of quantity. The surface area planted with vines had substantially increased, but the preferred varieties had been selected for their high yield rather than their quality, indeed an array of the most disparate grape varieties, some of which ripened far earlier than others, could be found crammed into a single plot. The carelessness and absence of a rational approach appalled the expert<sup>41</sup>.

The feature of greatest note was the high volume of production not for the delectation of foreign clients nor for a thirsty class of industrial workers whose numbers had not soared, but for the producers themselves, for own consumption. To paraphrase Schams, the producers themselves were blending the glorious mountain wines with the low-grade regional ones, frequently ruining them with colorants so that complaints from abroad about the demise of good Hungarian reds were perfectly justified. In order to remedy these practices, a more expedient manner of operation had to be propagated through education<sup>42</sup>.

The spiritual constitution of the wine producer, however, stood in the way of expediency. It had both positive and negative aspects. The negative aspect consisted of not wanting to make a profit. The producer did not yet regard his wine as a trading commodity to rid himself of as quickly as possible in exchange for the counter value of his work, cash. He lacked practical mercantile acumen. The positive aspect was the converse of this: the relationship between producer and product was a personal one. Instead of feeling a compulsion to sell his wine, he kept it for himself. Neither of these were uniquely Hungarian, yet the circumstances in which they thrived made them such: the feudal social and economic system was creaking at the seams and the reform movement’s advances stood in sharp contrast with the self-satisfaction of the producer of bad quality wines. The natural advantages the country benefited from coupled with the impediments to export and sales ought to have sufficed to prompt the producers to alter their methods, but their specifically Hungarian „economic indifference”, which could not be accounted for merely by cultural backwardness, stifled any such initiatives. Its origin could be traced to one of the Hungarian soul’s quintessential loathness to bestir itself, its reluctance to demonstrate mobility<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> Bortermelő, pp30-40.

<sup>41</sup> Bortermelő, pp42-44.

<sup>42</sup> Bortermelő, pp44-6.

<sup>43</sup> Bortermelő, pp44-48.

Count István Széchenyi, ever attentive to Hungarian blemishes, had been painfully aware of the low esteem in which Hungarian wines were held abroad, laying the blame for this squarely on the shoulders of the Hungarian spiritual constitution, variously labelling the cardinal sin as vanity, blowing one's own trumpet, arrogance or overestimating one's abilities. In the wine-growing sector this evinced itself in the producer's conviction that his sour must was an excellent wine and that if he did happen to produce a reasonable wine, he proclaimed that it was the world's best, or at least better than anything coming out of Madeira or Champagne. Obviously such attitudes impeded reform, but they also dissuaded the producers from adapting their wines to suit world tastes, since if the wine was good enough for him, it was good enough for foreigners as well. More than ignorance, what we witness here is what Széchenyi classified as a stubborn refusal to learn, laziness and abhorrence at the prospect of having to carry out harder work than in the past. Szekfű refrains from speculating further on whether this was related to unpretentiousness, to attaching scanty importance to the things of this world or to Eastern fatalism, contenting himself with resting on Széchenyi's authority<sup>44</sup>.

Even when the artificial hindrances to Hungarian wine exports were removed after the 1848 revolution, national self-righteousness and indolence kept putting the brakes on improvements, as Bertalan Szemere, Prime Minister during 1849 discovered when he began his career in business exporting Hungarian wines to France and later Britain, overcoming his self-confessed antipathy to the haggling involved in business transactions. In his correspondence with his suppliers and friends, complaints about the huge variations in quality between one consignment and the next, about how the wine had gone bad before being served at the client's table and the late delivery of promised shipments multiplied, all of which testified to a lack of mental discipline<sup>45</sup>.

Hungarian producers were hobbled by their inner make-up and unable to convert the country into an exporter overnight. The unfavourable spiritual disposition could only be overcome by unremitting toil over several generations<sup>46</sup>. The elite circles of the wine-growing industry did their utmost to counteract the detrimental effects of the national characteristics with their journal of viticulture, in 1863 the government commissioned a study on French cultivation methods and yet the same grievances about lack of consistently high production and bottling standards, primitive methods and sheer negligence were voiced again and again. Listening to them involuntarily conjured up spectre of the ancient Hungarian horseman of legend, alone without kindred in the endless expanses of the steppes, trusting solely in his own good fortune, which had cheated him so many times in the past, but which he never lost faith in since he could not survive without illusions nor did he have a gift for profit-orientated production and the wheeling and dealing that might upset his spiritual calm<sup>47</sup>.

The inescapable conclusion was that the spiritual constitution of the wine producers was not a negligible factor in the development (or lack thereof) of an important branch of the economy. Its flaws were not confined to the inhabitants of a specific region nor did they defer to social rank, afflicting the noblemen who shipped their perishable wines abroad with carefree abandon every bit as much as the peasants who mixed gut rotting potions to ease their cares. This was not, as Szekfű clarified, an licence for abdicating responsibility, but for the pain-

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<sup>44</sup> Bortermelő, pp52-55.

<sup>45</sup> Bortermelő, pp61-65.

<sup>46</sup> Bortermelő, p67.

<sup>47</sup> Bortermelő, pp67-78.

staking, conservative reform in tune with the Hungarian spirit that would eventually triumph over native inertia following in the footsteps of Széchenyi<sup>48</sup>.

History corroborated Szekfü's pessimism concerning the Hungarian antipathy to swift change: of the 3.5 million hectolitres of wine produced annually in the 1920s, only 10% was exported. In the second half of the same decade annual per capita consumption in Hungary was around 40 litres, double the pre-war amount. In international comparison, the corresponding amount for Germany was five litres, Czechoslovakia three and Austria ten<sup>49</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup> Szekfü, pp82-3.

<sup>49</sup> Romsics, pp169-170.

## **The Wanderer and the Exile: Hungary between East and West**

In the early 1930s, Lajos Prohászka produced a series of studies in the journal *Minerva* dissecting the Hungarian national character, which subsequently appeared in book form in 1936 under the title „The Wanderer and the Exile” (A vándor és a bujdosó). Although the collected essays had already been issued as a separate reprint, they made little impact, but the European climate had changed by the time the book reached the shelves and it exploded on to the intellectual scene, resonating with the younger generation and galvanising Szekfű, Mihály Babits and other highly respected authors into feverish activity to demolish its central propositions<sup>50</sup>.

The wanderer of the title was the German nation, embodying the active principle, whilst the Hungarians were the exiles, embodying passivity. The device of employing such a dichotomy on a symbolic level was intended to throw the uniquely Hungarian into high relief.

The Germans had a constant companion in terms of historical fate: the Hungarians, whom Prohászka described as being:

„...also lonely at the hearth shared by the peoples of Europe. Grudgingly tolerated newcomers, abandoned and without kith or kin, who in the course of long centuries made truly moving efforts at turning their faces towards the West and endeavoured to be the „model child” of Europe and who were elbowed away, always regarded as semi-barbarian in spite of this, who were unknown, or even worse than that: misunderstood”<sup>51</sup>.

This cruel lack of understanding and awareness of being disowned had prevented the Hungarians from becoming fully conscious of their true place. On the one hand, they were racked by feelings of inferiority, immaturity and being unrefined when they held their achievements up against the great Western cultures, whilst defiantly distancing themselves from them. This did not imply that the Hungarians had not devoted energies to self-definition, but they lacked a unifying myth on which to base a sense of solidarity<sup>52</sup>. From the point of view of outlining the contours of national character the only possible myth, although it existed in nothing more than embryonic form, was that of the rebellious Hungarian. Its major shortcoming, however, was that it was not representative of Hungarians as a whole<sup>53</sup>. Another possible candidate, the cherished notion of a self-sacrificing Hungarian destiny being that of a protective shield against incursions from the East did not stand up to closer scrutiny, acting more as a decorative consolation than a justification for life from which true strength could be drawn, leaving Hungarian fate as an enigma, which merely deepened over the passage of time<sup>54</sup>.

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<sup>50</sup> For a detailed study of the response to Prohászka’s attempt to enter into a symbolic discussion of Hungarian identity from the point of view of literary history, see Ambrus Miskolczy: *Szellem és nemzet, Napvilág kiadó, Budapest, 2001*, in particular the chapter on the genesis of *Mi a magyar?* on pp68-126.

<sup>51</sup> Prohászka: *A vándor és a bujdosó, Minerva könyvek, Dunántúl pécsi egyetemi könyvkiadó, Budapest, 1936*, p84, hereinafter Prohászka.

<sup>52</sup> Prohászka, pp84-5.

<sup>53</sup> Prohászka, pp85-6.

<sup>54</sup> Prohászka, p86.

The legacy of Hungarian origins had never vanished:

„[The Hungarian people] set off from somewhere in the East and in its blood carried with it the spell of the vast steppes and alongside that the hot-blooded love of plunder. But it also brought with it the curse of the steppes: indolent dreams and with this the yearning for being concealed and for seclusion where appalling dangers did not lurk and where there was no nagging uneasiness. This naive self-confidence, which rakishly turns against the whole world without, however, wishing to expand its existence, this instinctive smugness, or rather satisfaction with life as it is, which only looks at the immediate, has been typical of the Hungarians since they entered the pages of history”<sup>55</sup>.

He summarises these characteristics as „finitizmus” or „finitism”:

„which steers clear of everything, which is problematic, insoluble and induces suspense, but which is resolutely drawn towards the narrow, the safe, the permanent and is only translated into deeds when it may manifest its own existence in a clearly delineated fashion, by entrenching itself behind defined lines, as it were”<sup>56</sup>.

It was this finitism that inspired the Hungarians to select a geographically well-defined homeland to settle in and to attach such importance to the frontier regions and the lands adjacent to them with the Carpathians as a barrier to cut them off, physically and mentally, from the outside world, nurturing no dreams of conquest<sup>57</sup>.

Finitism was likewise at the root of the Hungarian lack of adaptability and love of stability whereby spontaneous, organic pliant development was alien and progress came in fits and starts as a result of external factors. Accustoming himself to the unchangeable, the Hungarian lived in a state of down-heartedness from which his capacity for long-suffering endurance emerged matched with a tendency for sudden, intemperate outbursts. His notorious sin of ephemeral enthusiasm [Széchenyi] also stemmed from finitism<sup>58</sup>. At this juncture, the wanderer enters into the equation with his ideas, institutions, problems and ethos, injecting tension into the Hungarian blood and becoming the Hungarian’s fate whether he liked it or not<sup>59</sup>.

This encounter with the Western mentality became a veritable thorn in the Hungarians’ side, goading them into change and challenging them in their self-satisfaction. In order to protect the remnants of their frontier lands, the exiles threw in their lot with the wanderer, but in so doing fell victim to the latter’s desire for infinity, which forced them to erect spiritual frontiers beyond which the West could not pass in full knowledge of their own feeble state [Prohászka, p90].

The fundamental experience of the Hungarians was the craving for independence, the fight for freedom, which endowed many of them with a sense of purpose. It could not, however, be likened to that of other peoples, as it was a sui generis penchant, neither an abstract idea nor a principle, but truly an experience, closely related to the finitistic urge. Within the artificial boundaries created, feelings of sickness and irredeemability preyed on the mind and anything outside of the frontiers was the object of suspicion as a potential threat. This was

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<sup>55</sup> Prohászka, p87.

<sup>56</sup> Prohászka, p87.

<sup>57</sup> Prohászka, pp87-8.

<sup>58</sup> Prohászka, pp88-9.

<sup>59</sup> Prohászka, p89.

why the Hungarians so jealously guarded and clung to their liberty. The finitistic spirit sought contentment and security in sealing itself off, yet found the self-imposed constraints impossible to endure, giving rise to the eternal oppositionalism so typical of the Hungarian attitude. Heroic strength in the face of oppression represented the positive offshoot of these qualities. The Hungarians' greatest fears indeed came true with their seclusion provoking enslavement, which in turn reinforced their attachment to seclusion in a vicious circle. Fending off the menace to their freedom blinded them to the underlying historical developments, which constantly caught them unprepared. Hence their fondness for taking refuge in illusions<sup>60</sup>.

That the voices of clear-sighted individuals in every generation calling for self-criticism were always ignored was seen by Prohászka as proof of the primacy of the emotional amongst his race. Reason lagged behind and easily yielded to bursts of enthusiasm, which it could not restrain. Whereas the Hungarians were in reality no more irascible than other European peoples, their affectivity was not linked to a tangible trigger; it was diffuse, disorganised, thrashed about with no apparent cause and as such childish. Subconsciously recognising this and realising that such behaviour could not be taken seriously, Hungarians compensated by displays of prowess, in a nutshell by showing off whether in the form of contempt for mortal danger, a delight in playing pranks or vanity<sup>61</sup>.

Numb resignation and the vitality-sapping belief in everything having been preordained also sprang from the sway held by an emotionalism incapable of formulating aims and directing action to practical ends. The sober aloofness shown by Hungarians was vegetative in nature and although it somewhat mitigated the excesses of the affective side, it was equally the source of general indifference and „intellectual petrification”<sup>62</sup>.

Completing the catalogue with lack of realism, escapism into the perceived glories of the past and sterile lamentations as the Hungarian expression of romantic disillusionment<sup>63</sup>, Prohászka moves on to ponder the martial and the Hungarian relationship with battle and combat, discerning warlikeness in both gallantry and realpolitik calculations. The specifically Hungarian dimension to this was the belief in the inevitability and yet ultimate futility of the struggle, a recurrent theme throughout history. Once having committed himself to the fight, the Hungarian heroically invests every ounce of his energy into it without any conviction. Even when pursuing an aim, he does not believe in it and where he is carried along by enthusiasm, he does not know what he is fighting for. These internal contradictions are precisely what set the Hungarian martial ideal apart. The Hungarians never fought for power or booty, out of rivalry or for pleasure, but only for themselves, for their survival and from a sense of rather than for the sake of honour. The fact that they took to arms under compulsion, under provocation gave their wrath its peculiar quality as an expression of the desire for freedom, of the fundamental experience as a mode of conduct<sup>64</sup>.

The absence of principles and genuine convictions was every bit as much the outcome of compulsion for the „people of hopeless struggles”. Combined with the driving force of the

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<sup>60</sup> Prohászka, pp91-4.

<sup>61</sup> Prohászka, pp94-6.

<sup>62</sup> Prohászka, pp96.

<sup>63</sup> Prohászka, pp96-100.

<sup>64</sup> Prohászka, pp103-4.

wrath, it explained the Hungarian nation's passion for politics, its ceaseless quest for compromises, as well as its oligarchic leanings, social fragmentation, absence of solidarity and indeed true class consciousness, its willingness to accept differences in rank and privilege, which was not born of subordination or lack of self-esteem, but of the modesty of the gentleman exile who emphasised his own importance by grovelling to others and, last but not least, legal formalism<sup>65</sup>.

Prohászka acknowledges that a given people's development is shaped not purely by internal dynamics, but by innumerable outside influences, whose original significance wanes and is eventually forgotten once it has become embedded in the recipient culture. Once again finitism reared its ugly head as a factor inhibiting receptiveness to foreign currents, which meant that it could only be fertilised and metamorphosed against its will, with fierce resistance directed towards the preservation of the ancient intellectual heritage. Paradoxically enough, however, Hungarians had always demonstrated a surprising degree of openness to the foreign, as if they expected and received strength from the outside, hence the East-West duality, which permitted the happy coexistence of dreams of Attila and a will to be part of Europe. The two were one: there was no contradiction between the Eastern Hungarian intent on keeping the world at bay and the forward-looking Western Hungarian keen to adapt to the latest European paradigms. The Western Hungarian with his wider European consciousness required the dreams of the East in order to live whilst the Eastern Hungarian seeking to overcome his traditional inhibitions required his Western half to act as his conscience, although the roles they played were interchangeable with the Western Geist the vehicle of lethargy and the Eastern the wellspring of renewal. Both elements represented an integral part of the national character<sup>66</sup>. Their combination suited the Hungarians to becoming the mediator amongst the other peoples of Europe. In an ironic twist of fate, its mediation activity was primarily directed inwards, with the finitistic Hungarians absorbing opposites and, thrown into a fever by them, losing their racial exclusiveness, breaking away from themselves as it were, dispersing, yet in so doing expanding once and for all and becoming flexible. In fact, Prohászka views this dispersal with the mixing of blood and ideas it entailed as the second defining factor of Hungarian existence alongside finitism<sup>67</sup>.

The first major influence on Hungarian development came from the Latin, followed by the German. Whereas there was a certain spiritual affinity between the Hungarian and the Latin, the same could not be said of the German, which forever lurked at the back of the Hungarian mind in negative form, as something to be imitated and yet resisted. The exile daydreamed of overcoming his isolation, of salvation through adopting the wanderer's way of life, what appealed to him about it was the experience of life, self-realisation and understanding of fate. Hungarian scholarship modelled itself on the German example and the exile styled his economic and social activity, particularly the spheres relating to the bourgeois lifestyle on the wanderer's template. The anomaly of the Germans being considered as the Hungarians' „arch enemy” and the frequently observed „hatred of the Germans” was not loathing, but more the annoyance of someone who has been disturbed from his comfortable repose<sup>68</sup>.

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<sup>65</sup> Prohászka, pp105-114.

<sup>66</sup> Prohászka, pp127-8.

<sup>67</sup> Prohászka, pp129-30.

<sup>68</sup> Prohászka, pp132-5.

In the coda to his work, Prohászka addresses the topical issue of Europe on the brink of primordial chaos, squeezed between ever narrower borders with the encroachment of the East, having flooded through the ancient dam of the Carpathians and turning its greedy eyes towards the Hungarian plains and, beyond them, the hallowed hearths of Europe and yet this left Europe cold. Europe was in a state of decline, not because its peoples could not understand one another, nor because they no longer understood the mission of the European concept they held in common, but because they no longer exhibited the instinctive strengths, which could substitute for the mutual understanding. Only two nations had demonstrated that they had not definitively been bewitched by the prevailing spirit, but had retained their living contacts with the inner soul: the Italians and the Germans. Each in their own way reacted against symptoms of ageing in the European mindset, with classicism and romanticism respectively<sup>69</sup>. It was no coincidence that these tendencies met in Central Europe and Hungary, not just by dint of historical necessity, but also of its own volition was inextricably linked to this European Centre. Europeans had only ever perceived the Hungarians as exotic, their territories as potential colonies. Nobody had a more legitimate complaint about having been misunderstood than the Hungarians and yet they themselves had failed to grasp the essence of the European spirit, the active principle:

„It is the universal European activity from which the Hungarian does indeed markedly deviate with his Eastern imperturbability, supercilious idleness, as he smokes his pipe while watching the world go by and with his appalling sense of timing when it comes to taking action. Amongst them [i.e. the peoples of Europe] the Hungarian is without kindred not because of his racial pedigree, or the foreignness of his language, but instead because of this entirely different outlook”<sup>70</sup>.

This was the real reason that „the noble Hungarian people” had always been something of a curiosity and an anachronism in the eyes of the rest of Europe<sup>71</sup>. The Hungarians continued to possess the good will that Europe had forgotten and which represented the irrational backdrop to mutual understanding and had united Europe into a single entity and it was in fostering an understanding that would raise human beings to a higher plane that Hungary’s vocation lay<sup>72</sup>.

In 1939 Mihály Babits’ essay *On the Hungarian Character* was published as part of a collection on the subject of *What is Hungarianness? (Mi a Magyar?)*, edited by the Szekfü.<sup>73</sup> as a comprehensive response to Prohászka’s allegations. Babits begins by stressing the historical, as opposed to the biological definition of Hungarianness, as a phenomenon that evolved over time and is not physical, but spiritual, although it is alive.<sup>74</sup> Hence the need to take account of the forms it assumed in the past:<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Prohászka, pp167-8.

<sup>70</sup> Prohászka, p169.

<sup>71</sup> Prohászka, p170.

<sup>72</sup> Prohászka, pp170-1.

<sup>73</sup> Magyar Szemle Társaság, Magyar Szemle Könyvei 15, Budapest, 1939. Reprint of the first edition by Helikon Kft., Gyomaendrőd, 1992, referred to in the following as Szekfü. Babits, along with other authors in the volume such as László Ravasz, define their stance on Hungarianness in opposition to Lajos Prohászka. See: *Helyünk Európában*, Magvető kiadó, Budapest, 1986, Volume One, p355.

<sup>74</sup> Szekfü, pp37-39.

<sup>75</sup> Szekfü, p39.

„Hungarianness, as I know it from life and from books and which I feel within myself as well, is to be frank not vague and even less insubstantial. Its substance is national tradition itself: in other words the aggregate of memories of fate and intellectual and emotional experiences. It appears externally as the Hungarian character and demeanour, which can be empirically observed and indisputably circumscribed in words”.<sup>76</sup>

Its thousand faces and the endless changes it undergoes make it hard to pin down and this tantalising impalpability has helped it to elude rigorous analysis.<sup>77</sup> The crisis brought on by the recent trauma of the peace treaty has inspired a wave of investigations into the national character, which fail to convince because they take as their source material ready-made pronouncements on the issue tailored for the consumption of a specific audience rather than sifting through the oeuvres of the poetic greats, which subconsciously betray its contents.<sup>78</sup> Moreover the true focus of the researchers’ interest is not the national character itself so much as the national destiny. Therefore any pretension to dispassionate objectivity on their part is precisely that. They involuntarily bend the facts to fit the theory.<sup>79</sup>

For the Hungarian, seeking greater insight into his innermost being is not related to similar endeavours elsewhere in Europe, nor is it a misguided nationalistic gesture intended to separate him from all others:

„He feels too isolated, too lonely as it is. If he searches after his national character he is looking for precisely the spiritual link that joins every Hungarian together, the few people in the world who are Hungarian! And he looks for his place amongst the European nations, not to separate himself from them, but to stand amongst them”.<sup>80</sup>

The methodological difficulty of the enquiry is presented by the sources themselves. The biography of the Hungarians, history, and that diary of intellectual events, literature, are saturated with external influences. The exercise is comparable to isolating an element, which only occurs in compounds.<sup>81</sup> Primitiveness is not necessarily synonymous with authenticity or undiluted purity. The simple peasant way of life is remarkably international in terms of the way of thinking it encourages: variations tend to be restricted to the trappings alone.<sup>82</sup> A final pitfall to avoid is overloading the fragments of information of the medieval chronicles with significance by giving free reign to the imagination and reading too much into given words.<sup>83</sup>

Nevertheless:

„A nation’s character, like that of an individual, is a unified and organic thing; the substance, which I wish to grasp, is present everywhere and binds everything together”.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Szekfű, p40.

<sup>77</sup> Szekfű, pp 40-41.

<sup>78</sup> Szekfű, p42.

<sup>79</sup> Szekfű, pp 42-43.

<sup>80</sup> Szekfű, p46.

<sup>81</sup> Szekfű, pp47 and 49.

<sup>82</sup> Szekfű, p49.

<sup>83</sup> Szekfű, pp49-50.

<sup>84</sup> Szekfű, pp50-51.

The world of concepts open to the national soul is moulded by the country, the land, the colours of the climate and the racial temperament. Tradition and culture have welded the countless, disparate racial elements into a single, unified entity and the language has a crucial role to play in the process:

„First of all this language took over the role of the vanished, intermingled ancient race, that of preserving and shaping the intellectual formation we designate as the Hungarians. „The nation resides in its language” according to the old saying and as far as the Hungarians are concerned this is almost literal truth (...). Knowledge of the Hungarian language is certainly still not enough in itself to make someone into a Hungarian. The wire does not make the electric current. The Hungarian language is a medium and a wire in which the living, spiritual current of the Hungarians pulsates onward. This current has its point of departure in the depths of the race and was induced there, but it is the language that picked it up and transmitted it further. In performing this service culture, literature and art attach themselves to language, representing a kind of extension and polyphonic amplification of the language”.<sup>85</sup>

Given that a thousand years have elapsed since the arrival of the Hungarian settlers, Babits is sceptical towards theories emphasising the Eastern aspects of Hungarianness:

„We are a people of our local surroundings, it is here that we blended into a nation from the types that congregated in this place. Our way of life also developed into what it is now. Our imagination, our emotional universe and our entire culture were woven from the landscapes, colours produced by the climate to be found here and from the impressions and moods they created. Not only does this land keep watch over the memories of our life and history, but from our earliest childhood we too inseparably carry within ourselves thousands of different memories of this land. We ourselves are this memory. If a profound correlation and spiritual connection exists between people and country then it certainly exists between our people and our country! Of course I am referring to the thousand-year-old country. the land wreathed by the mountains in a semi circle...Every part of it participated in the relationship; random political events do not count here. This beautiful, rounded territory is the bed in which it was born, the mattress on which it can stretch out in comfort; it is the vessel in which this Hungarian blood was mixed and the palette for the colours of our culture”.<sup>86</sup>

The rich variety of landscapes within a single geographical unit left their mark on the Hungarian soul, although inferences about the Hungarian character cannot be made from the environment alone<sup>87</sup> as the vicissitudes of history must be added to the equation. Hungary’s location at the frontier between East and West meant that it acted as a crossroads, a point of impact between cultures. Under such circumstances any nation would have been forced to count a fierce martial spirit amongst its characteristics. Fighting could simply not be avoided.<sup>88</sup> In the face of constant change, unwillingness to show wonder or surprise became engrained in Hungarian behaviour, though this did not preclude a weakness for splendour and displays of grandeur noted in the earliest records. This should not be confused with world-weariness.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Szekfű, pp51-52 and 53-54.

<sup>86</sup> Szekfű, pp54-55.

<sup>87</sup> Szekfű, p57.

<sup>88</sup> Szekfű, p57.

<sup>89</sup> Szekfű, pp59-60.

Hungarians do not brood excessively, they do not wallow in any single emotion or feel bitterness without due cause:

„This sober and matter-of-fact self-assurance signifies a realism of outlook. First and foremost it is a contemplative rather than a practical realism (...). It is the realism of seeing. The behaviour of a people that has learned to watch continuously the thousand different influences and impressions flowing over it fully aware that it is powerless against them just as it is powerless against the weather. The Hungarian is the man who lazily stands at the gate looking around as he smokes his pipe, keeping an eye on the clouds. Seeing is self-assured, pure, calm and there is no darkness in it, no mysticism or metaphysics, but all the more colour and reality”.<sup>90</sup>

The Hungarian's natural detachment, his reluctance to get carried away in the heat of the moment ideally suits him to the political and diplomatic careers. Without this ability to weigh up the significance of events the nation would have died out long ago. To dub the Hungarians a warrior or a political nation is to overlook the dignified wisdom they show in knowing when to refrain from action. Prudent caution is as much a part of Hungarianness as manful demonstrations of prowess. This apparent lethargy is perhaps the sole remaining trace of the Hungarians' origins in the East and it is precisely this characteristic, contemplative disregard, unconsciously sceptical shrewdness, which distinguishes the Hungarians from all their neighbours.<sup>91</sup>

From this passive contentment with his allotted portion flows the Hungarian's acumen in and passionate attachment to the law, representing a search for permanence, for durability in human dealings:

„Firstly the permanence of his country. This „territory of the sacred crown”, unified and unchangeable for a thousand years. Other nations may either add to or lose their possessions. Hungary is like a living body, which cannot be hacked at or extended. History bears witness to the fact that every expansion or act of conquest has quickly withered on the vine and conversely its severed parts have sooner or later knitted back together, but whilst this had still not yet happened the Hungarian has always been able to look upon this unified and complete piece of land as his own and no other. This thousand-year-old legal state of affairs is a greater and truer reality in his eyes than the changing situations created by the chance operations of politics.

The same ideal permanence is attached to the constitution, the moral territory and holdings of the Hungarians as it were. Once again it provides a fixed point of reference in the cosmos. The constitution can be breached a thousand times over; governments can ignore it or deliberately violate it. Even if this is true for hundreds of years at a stretch the true Hungarian will continue to consider the constitution alive and in force. He insists on the „fiction of constitutional law”. In the same way as Hungarian families, clans and certain individuals incessantly cling to their rights and privileges”.<sup>92</sup>

It is the principle that counts and the validity of laws does not depend on whether they can be enforced by applying penalties or on whether anyone else recognises them as applicable. Defending legal permanence is Hungary's true vocation, rather than defending European culture against the barbaric incursions of the East, an honour to which other nations can lay claim, even if it is a house built on the shifting sands of self-delusion. Hungarian „rebellious-

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<sup>90</sup> Szekfü, pp61-62.

<sup>91</sup> Szekfü, pp63-65.

<sup>92</sup> Szekfü, pp69 and 70.

ness” stemmed merely from the desire to protect what was his and it would therefore be misleading to cast it as a peculiar characteristic.<sup>93</sup> Revolt for the Hungarian is more opposition than action, passive resistance the archotypically Hungarian way of life and his forbearance is not subservience. What finally prods him out of his inertia is being molested, having his tranquillity transgressed and thereby his freedom impinged on.<sup>94</sup>

Jealously guarding his own, the Hungarian is nevertheless not intellectually blinkered and parochial:

„...the Hungarian people is open-minded as well as open-eyed. For nine hundred years its culture has been progressing together with that of Europe. Its openness springs from deep causes drawn from history and life. Even our race is an open one and has embraced the foreign into its bosom with hospitality for a millennium. Our language has been able to absorb the most disparate elements without having lost its fundamental character (...). We accept intellectual experiences with the same openness. One of the glories of our literature is the abundance and high quality of literary translations. We are perfectly entitled to maintain that the receptiveness of our intellectual culture does not lag behind that of the German for example”.<sup>95</sup>

Once goaded into defensive action, the Hungarian looks back on his immobility with bitter regret, the stuff of which his national literature, suffused with tragedy, is made. The moral reprehensibility of missed opportunities. Hence Hungarian rhetoric exudes the seriousness of the voice of conscience rather than the exuberance of intellectual fireworks display or the pathos of outpourings of sentiment. It would be wrong to describe the Hungarians as moralising or fond of oratory, however, because their true being is contemplative. They feel it is their duty to aspire to the former qualities. Indeed all the fertile contradictions of the Hungarian character lend it vitality. Even its pessimism is not a slough of despondency, but a source of renewed vigour.<sup>96</sup>

To the thinkers of the interwar years who did not subscribe to a facile, biological-racist explanation of national identity, Hungarianness was essence, soul, a unifying spiritual force expressed through culture, characteristics and language, prior to them, yet dependent on them for survival. They are its very lifeblood. Any restriction or attack on these is therefore tantamount to an assault on the innermost self and the cohesion of the community. The relationship between essence and its mediations is both intimate and mutually reinforcing:

„Language therefore outwardly separates one nation from another, whilst inwardly it is one of the most fundamental factors constructing the nation. It is not a subsidiary matter, but a reality deeply rooted in the body and soul of the nation, part of its organism to which its existence, its life is linked. It is far more than a mere vehicle of thoughts. Every peculiar characteristic, thought process, perception, emotional experience, nerve fabric of the national soul and the workings of its imagination are expressed in language: it is the most personal repository, preserver and container of its character. Take away the nation’s language and it ceases to be what it was; it fades away, amalgamates and expires in the sea of surrounding nations”.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Szekfű, pp71-72.

<sup>94</sup> Szekfű, pp76-77.

<sup>95</sup> Szekfű, pp73-74.

<sup>96</sup> Szekfű, pp79, 80 and 83.

<sup>97</sup> Vilmos Tolnai, „The immortal Hungarian language” in: *Vérző Magyarország. Magyar Írók Magyarorszáig területéért*. Edited by Dezső Kosztolányi, Hélios Nyomda, Budapest, 1928, p55.

## Turanianism and the Finno-Turkish War

In an article published in the journal *Nyugat* in 1916, Zoltán Szász reviewed the meteoric rise of an expression, which had become the height of fashion in public declarations, books, poetry and ceremonial addresses, and which he regarded with disdain as a frippery, a rallying cry so vague that it did not merit the distinction of being considered a concept. It would never have been plucked forth from the recesses of obscurity had it not been for the meeting of Hungarian and Bulgarian troops at Brza-Palanka the previous year. Its devotees used Turanianism to describe a huge community of races comprising the Hungarians, Bulgarians, Turks, Finns, Tartars, Voguls, Ostyaks, Kami, Turkomans, Cheremissians, Tungusians and, last but not least, the Japanese. The three most important links in the Turanian chain stretching from Dévény to Tokyo were the Hungarians, Bulgarians and Turks (incidentally, as Szász points out, also links in the Hamburg-Baghdad chain of power). Turanianism, in the light of the sheer size of territories and number of peoples it claimed to encompass, thought on a global scale and its runaway popularity in Hungary could be ascribed to Hungary's leadership role as the most cultivated nation within the family, elevating Budapest to the status of a Turanian Paris.

Szász distinguishes between the *Turáni Társaság* (Turanian Society) founded in 1910, of which Pál Teleki was a member, which dispatched scientists and linguists to Asia to carry out research yielding valuable studies and the „profane” or vulgarised Turanian associations and their lowbrow publications responsible for social agitation and thereby doing a great deal of damage. The notion of community between such disparate peoples from which a more far-reaching theory of kinship derived was mere fantasy without the slightest foundation in science. The only common feature between peoples with the widest variety of physical traits, religions and levels of cultural attainment was that they all spoke agglutinative languages. Adherents to the Turanian doctrine, however, believed that they were all the descendents of the same Turanian ethnic group and carried the legacy of an ancient culture in their blood. The Hungarians, striving at the expense of strenuous effort to prove themselves worthy of their white, Aryan and Semitic culture, were unconscious renegades who could look back to a more glorious past than the Teutons and Latins currently contributing to their culture. Moreover, Turanian self-esteem could rescue the Hungarians from their solitary existence in Europe where they had huddled as an orphan and could console them with the knowledge that they were the most distinguished members of an illustrious ethnic group, although it had somewhat gone down in the world. Szász's analysis of the psychological compensatory mechanisms involved is incisive. He dubs the wish to break free from the isolation implicit in being Hungarian surrounded by a Slavic and German sea (echoing Herder's prediction of inevitable Hungarian decline towards extinction) as a „peculiar collective sentimentality” and is quick to draw attention to the essay by Gyula Germánusz, which proved that in history, the adjective Turanian was used to designate non-Iranian peoples and was therefore the equivalent of the term „barbarian” as applied by the ancient Greeks.

When poets and researchers chased daydreams it was an innocent, though somewhat odd pastime, but when Turanianism strayed into the realm of social and political ideology it assumed a quite different complexion. In so far as it encouraged peoples to unite it was harmless enough, but as soon as it degenerated into a pretext for segregation and ostracism it became a threat. Illustrating Turanianism's darker side, Szász mentions the *Turáni Kör* (Turanian Circle) founded in one of the counties in north-east Hungary (Szabolcs) and its

fulminations concerning „Hungarian virtues”, the „concept of the Hungarian nation” and „the Turanian concept, which has swollen into a racial idea” all of which it aspired to cultivate whilst taking up the fight against „all manner of internal currents inimical to the nation”. The true nature of this virulent strain of Turanianism was, in his words, reactionary, often clerical and anti-Semitic in spirit, deeply dissatisfied with the country’s social and intellectual development, with its Western orientation and institutions. Unlike the Turanians who wished to shun the Slavs, Germanic and Semitic peoples - indeed as Szász ironically writes, the great advantage of Turanianism over its competitors is that it sanctions hatred of all three with equal venom - and propel their nation into the arms of the Japanese, Szász recognised that even if the Hungarians of the honfoglalás were the kindred of the Huns and the Tatars and at least in part derived from Mongoloid stock, a thousand years of living in a European climate, with a European diet and culture and of racial mixing meant that their present day descendents belonged to the white race both physically and mentally. In his eyes this was tantamount to denying an evolution for the better, to hankering after inglorious beginnings and ran counter to all common sense<sup>98</sup>.

A similarly damning critique of Turanianism by József Schmidt appeared in the columns of the same journal in 1925. Tracing it back to its beginnings, he points out that it was coined by the English linguist of German extraction, Max Müller who popularised Sanskrit and philology in Hungary in the days when it was customary to classify languages not only on the basis of their origin, but also according to their structure as a result of which language groups of radically different ancestry could be lumped together. In his „On the Classification of the Turanian Languages” (1854), Müller had grouped Ural-Altai, Caucasian, Indo-Chinese, Malay-Polynesian, Dravidian and other languages into one massive category, which he termed as „Turanian”. Although he retracted the usage later, the genie had well and truly been let out of the bottle. Hungarian was alleged to belong to the Ural branch of the Ural-Altai languages along with Finnish and Samoyedic, whilst the Altaic comprised the Turkish, Tartar, Mongolian, Tungus-Manchu and Japanese language families. Whereas the former proposition had gained general acceptance, there was no proof that the languages in the Altaic branch were related, nor was there a shred of evidence that the two branches had anything in common. Thus the shifting sands of the Turanian hypothesis hardly provided a solid foundation upon which to construct grander theories, such as Turanianism. In Schmidt’s view, peoples and races had nothing to do with languages, as Hungary more than adequately showed: how many of its inhabitants spoke Hungarian and considered themselves Hungarian without having a drop of honfoglaló blood in their veins. In short, it was impossible to infer kinship and „racial” solidarity from affinities between languages. In spite of the large number of Turkish loan words in Hungarian and pre-honfoglalás contacts between Hungarians and Turkish elements, there were no means of proving that the Hungarians were a purely Turkish race and that they had any blood ties with the „Turanian” Turks.

Schmidt sides with Teleki and Professor Jenő Cholnoky of the Turanian Society who maintained that „Turanian” was not a linguistic or ethnographic concept, but a purely geographical one and that although „Turanian peoples” existed, it was not language and origin that bound them together, but a shared way of life. Turanianism oozed politics from its every pore, as the

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<sup>98</sup> For all of the above see, Zoltán Szász: Turanizmus. In: Nyugat, 1916, No. 16. Reproduced in full with no page references in Nyugat, 1908-1941, egy irodalmi legenda - digitálisan, CD-ROM, Arcanum adatbázis, Budapest.

driving force behind every political movement was emotion, which was always right simply because it always wanted to be right and could only undermine its own credibility by pretending to be a science. The Hungarians' entire past testified to their repudiation of Turanianism, as they had embraced Western culture a millennium ago<sup>99</sup>.

The Turanianism to which the two authors refer evolved from ideas that enjoyed such high profile around the time of the millennial celebrations, following a long and highly public polemical battle between historians researching into Hungarian origins, which became known in the vernacular as the „Finno-Turkish war”. The dividing line between the factions was between those who subscribed to Finno-Ugric descent and those who preferred a more eastward-looking Turkish heritage. In 1770, János Sajnovits proved that the Lapp and Hungarian languages were related and in 1799 Samuel Gyarmathi published a book extending this to Finnish and other Finno-Ugric tongues. Four years after Sajnovits, István Horváth advanced the megalomaniac theory that the Hungarians, whom he identified with the Scythians, had originated in Abyssinia, had migrated to Greece via Egypt and as far as the Atlantic and that they were the arbiters of all human culture<sup>100</sup>. Flórián Mátyás joined him in railing against the Finno-Ugric side, filled with abhorrence that they could suggest the proud and aristocratic Hungarians could be tainted by „kinship reeking of fish oil” and felt it was the duty of all right-minded citizens to deny the calumnies propagated about their mother tongue with deeds as well as words<sup>101</sup>. As far as science was concerned, he had backed the loser, yet the Turanian seed planted in the public mind began putting out shoots, drawing sustenance from the secessionist movement in the arts<sup>102</sup>.

In the wake of Trianon resentment and disillusionment with the West gave Turanianism fresh impetus as Hungarians sought to re-evaluate their culture, sloughing off decadent Western accretions and nurturing a new sense of its dignity and superiority in place of fretting about its relative backwardness<sup>103</sup>.

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<sup>99</sup> József Schmidt: Turanizmus, Nyugat, 1925, No. 20, Arcanum.

<sup>100</sup> György Balázs: Nacionalizmus és turanizmus. In: Világosság, 1966, Number 3, p163.

<sup>101</sup> Szász, in the article quoted above and Ildikó Farkas: A turánizmus. In: Magyar Tudomány, Volume 38, 1993, No. 7, p861, hereinafter Farkas .

<sup>102</sup> Farkas, pp862-3.

<sup>103</sup> Cf. Farkas, p865.

## Conclusion

During the interwar years, identity became the issue, which overshadowed all others in the consciousness of the Hungarian intellectual elite. Studies in national character abounded as the nation's thinkers attempted to make sense of the inconceivable, of what had propelled the Hungarians over the brink of the abyss at Trianon and what political course ought to be steered, so that their significance far exceeded that of a simple compilation of national stereotypes. Indeed the subtext of the debates and deliberations was intimately bound up with defining Hungary's place within Europe as well as representing a response to the ferment of ideas within the broader context of European thought. If the Hungarians of Romania, Slovakia and Yugoslavia retained their unique essence and if citizenship of another state was meaningless in the face of this, indeed if they suffered discrimination or downright persecution on a daily basis because they were perceived as Hungarians even within the new frontiers then such an atrocious injustice had to be appealed against and revisionism was the only logical cause to embrace.

Similarly, emphasising the Eastern origins of the Hungarian people was not simply a compensatory mechanism for the humiliations piled upon the nation, although it was an implicit rebuke against Europe for the intolerance it had demonstrated in punishing such a noble and untainted race, but also provided the nation with an alternative set of non-European values and ideals, a return to pre-Christian roots, which renounced the approach of integration pursued over the centuries. The tribal chieftain and his leadership style, the warlike virtues and the rigid, caste-like demarcation lines between the various social strata were embedded in the Hungarian nature, denying them was futile. Clearly the undercurrent here is an affirmation of entrenched privilege and of authoritarian rule. Stressing Hungary's role as bastion of the West against the depredations of barbaric invaders, its willingness to adapt to the circumstances of the new homeland, to be flexible and compromise, frequently symbolised in Saint István's inspired and statesmanlike decision to forcibly convert the nation to Christianity and thereby rescue it from the otherwise inevitable attacks it would have been subjected to as a pagan island in a Christian sea, represented an avowal of tradition, of stability, of democracy, liberty and respect for the rule of law.

Any discourse on identity involves an inclusion-exclusion paradigm. Once Trianon had transformed Hungary from a multi-ethnic state to a more or less homogenous stump, the energies that had previously been expended in holding the extensive ethnic patchwork of territories together ideologically with concepts of the „political nation” and the lands of the Holy Crown of Saint István, united in purpose and destiny, were compelled to find another outlet. Gradually attention settled on what Anthony Smith has evocatively termed „the outsider within”, a process accelerated by the spread of radical interpretations of the concept of race and the political ascendancy of the extreme right-wing (epitomised by Szálasi's nyilaskereszt or Arrow Cross Movement). In Hungary this meant two groups, the Germans and the Jews who had been pivotal in establishing a middle-class<sup>104</sup>. Ironically it was their very success in assimilating, in adopting the language and customs of the society into which they merged so seamlessly that made them appear so threatening and subversive in the minds of those who viewed the world through the contamination-obsessed prism of racial-biological

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<sup>104</sup> Péter Hanák, *A kert és a műhely. Közös dolgaink*, Gondolat, Budapest, 1988, p83, hereinafter Hanák.

theory. Their presence did indeed challenge the principle of classification because they could barely be distinguished from their fellow citizens even though no Hungarian blood was presumed to course through their veins. Since virtually all that betrayed them was linguistic, their intonation, vocabulary, use of word order and the like, these became the targets of ridicule in satirical literature<sup>105</sup>.

That the Hungarian value system faithfully reflected the biases of the ruling elite, whereby land ownership was the only respectable source of income, horse breeding and racing, hunting and participation in local politics were noble pursuits and high office in diplomacy, the church and the army were acceptable occupations with industry, trade and banking enjoying considerably less prestige, as Péter Hanák points out, is hardly surprising given that throughout the period only a handful of intellectuals of peasant or equally humble birth ever scaled the giddy heights of higher education to claim that their class was the true repository of undiluted Hungarian essence<sup>106</sup>. The symbiosis between social architecture, assumptions and cultural reproduction extolled „masculine” and aristocratic qualities, rendering women and other low status groups such as the Roma invisible.

Although the contents of the first edition of Szekfű's seminal *Három nemzedék* (Three Generations) were seized upon by the disgruntled lower middle classes as a stick to beat their (generally more prosperous) Jewish rivals with, the historian himself had intended the work as an act of criticism of national morals and of the traditional ruling classes<sup>107</sup>. Szekfű's wife was Jewish and as we have seen from his warts and all analysis of the Hungarian wine producer, he condemned the narrow exclusionist categories and it would be overly simplistic to brand him a hard core anti-Semite. In the columns of *Magyar Szemle* (The Hungarian Review) and the pages of „What is Hungarianness?” he and his fellow authors refused to countenance the immutability of biology by defending characteristics, which could be acquired over the course of history through the extended cohabitation of peoples. For Szekfű and the conservatives clustered around him, biology was not destiny, nor was Nazi Germany the saviour of Europe as Prohászka believed.

As the storm clouds gathered on the horizon, however, few in Hungary listened, the promise of territorial restitution and welcoming back the lost sons and daughters torn from the nation's arms proved too great a temptation to withstand. The pact with the devil had cataclysmic consequences, not just for the Jewish population, but for all Hungarians. Against this backdrop the interwar reappraisals of Hungarian identity, far from being than the whimsical and outmoded musings of a bygone age, stand as an admonition, a clarion call for the type of honest confrontation with defects, which became impossible in the framework of the ritualised, legitimating denunciations of Communism, a last stand of the humane against the forces of annihilation.

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<sup>105</sup> Hanák, pp87-8.

<sup>106</sup> Hanák, p96.

<sup>107</sup> Ferenc Glatz's preface to the reprint edition of *Három nemzedék*, Maecenas, Budapest, 1989, p22.