

## **Immigrant Lives and Lifestyles in Canada, 1924-1939\***

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Hungarians immigrated to Canada in four distinct waves. At the end of the nineteenth century and during the early part of the twentieth came what might be called the "pioneers." Between 1924 and 1939 came the interwar immigrants. In the late 1940s and early 1950s came the post-war émigrés; and in 1956-57, the refugees. Of these four groups, the second is probably the most important due partly to its size, and partly to the role it played in Hungarian-Canadian history. Nevertheless, this particular stream of Hungarian immigrants to Canada is the least known among Hungarian Canadians today, due mainly to the fact that neither scholars nor amateur historians paid much attention to it.<sup>1</sup>

The immigration of the so-called "interwar stream" of Hungarian newcomers to Canada began in 1924 and lasted until 1939. The bulk of them arrived before the onset of the Great Depression, as after 1930 only immediate relatives of Canadian residents were allowed to enter the country. Numerically, this group was the second largest among the four waves of Hungarian immigrants to Canada. Its arrival contributed to a four-fold increase in Canada's Hungarian population in the period under discussion in this paper. But the importance of this stream went beyond the realm of demographic growth: the post-1924 immigrants greatly promoted the dispersal of Canada's Hun-

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*\*Many parts of this paper are based on a draft of my forthcoming book, *Struggle and Hope: The Hungarian-Canadian Experience* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, expected in 1982), a collaborative work to which Drs. Bennett Kovrig, Paul Bődy and M. L. Kovacs have each contributed a chapter. Research for this book has been carried out with the help of an "Ethnic Histories" grant from the Department of the Secretary of State of Canada, for which I am very grateful.*

garian population throughout much of the country, and they were mainly responsible for the establishment of Magyar colonies in many of Canada's large cities, especially Montreal and Toronto.

Not many aspects of this immigrant stream's history have been preserved in printed sources. A few "success stories" have been recorded in journalistic accounts and amateur histories,<sup>2</sup> but next to nothing has been written about the everyday lives of the mass of these immigrants.<sup>3</sup> This fact is unfortunate, as the story of the interwar immigrants' lifestyles is interesting and instructive. To the layman it presents a human drama rich in triumphs, achievements as well as failures and tragedies. To the scholar, the examination of these immigrants' lifestyles offers glimpses of the world of the uprooted poor as they made the transition from life in the East European countryside to that of the increasingly industrialized society of North America. In particular, it reveals the multitude of problems that newcomers faced both as members of an ethnic group and as new residents of a strange country.

The study of the everyday lives of newcomers also reveals much that is relevant to the understanding of the processes which affect immigrants and immigrant groups' acculturation, integration, culture maintenance and so on. In the case of the Hungarian immigrants to Canada of the interwar years, the story of their lifestyles tends to indicate that because these people lived in utmost uncertainty and poverty, they could rarely make persistent efforts at hastening their adjustment to their new homeland. At the same time, these same conditions had negative implications on the process of culture maintenance within the Hungarian-Canadian ethnic group. It is hoped that this paper will shed some light not only on the everyday problems that Hungarian immigrants to this country encountered during the interwar years, but also on the difficulties they had in adjusting to and integrating into Canadian society, in establishing their immigrant institutions, in maintaining their community life and, in general, in building the foundations of their individual and collective future in Canada.

1

For a proper understanding of our subject it is necessary to consider briefly some aspects of the historical context of

Hungarian immigration to Canada in the 1920s and 1930s. To do so we must look at the social and economic conditions of contemporary Canada, the nature and geographic distribution of Canada's existing Hungarian communities, and at the social and cultural heritage which newcomers from Hungary brought with them in the period under discussion in this paper.

Three facts stand out about the social and economic environment which confronted Hungarian immigrants to Canada in the years after 1924. First there was the fact that Canada at the time was still very much a "hewer of wood and drawer of water." The frontier still loomed large in most aspects of Canadian economic and social life, and jobs for newcomers were available as a rule only on the country's agricultural, mining and lumber frontier. The second fact which must be kept in mind about contemporary Canada stemmed directly from the above described conditions. Since the Dominion was still a producer of staples and raw materials, its economic life was governed very much by the climate. Canada was an "eight months country," where jobs were almost invariably seasonal. The last important aspects of contemporary Canadian reality was the fact that very little state help was available to the poor, and even less to impoverished newcomers.

Canada's existing Hungarian community, which "received" the Magyar newcomers of the 'twenties and 'thirties, was on the whole a socially underprivileged, economically weak, politically uninfluential and a culturally divided group.<sup>4</sup> It could provide very little help collectively to their newly arrived countrymen; while on an individual basis, it could assist only a limited number of new arrivals. As a result, most members of the post-1924 immigrant stream had to make it on their own in Canada.

As the socio-cultural heritage of any immigrant stream greatly influences the lifestyles of its members in the years following immigration, an introduction of this type should say a few words about the newcomers themselves. In this connection it must be kept in mind that the vast majority of Hungarian arrivals to Canada between 1924 and 1939 were classified as "agriculturalists," most other categories of immigrants having been barred from the country by government regulations. In spite of this, the post-World War I Hungarian immigration stream was socially and culturally more mixed than the previous one. Not all of the newcomers were simple peasants, as had

almost been the case with the pre-1914 arrivals. In the 1920s hundreds of impoverished middle and even upper-class elements sought refuge in Canada from the social, economic and political upheavals which shook Hungary in the turbulent aftermath of the war. Moreover, even those post-1924 immigrants who had a peasant background tended to differ from their pre-1914 predecessors. This was the result of their somewhat better education, their often prolonged service in the armed forces of the Habsburg Empire (or, later, in those of the successor states),<sup>5</sup> and their exposure to new ideologies. The new immigrants proved to be more critical and more impatient than their predecessors. Their greater "sophistication" or "worldliness," their restlessness, their tendency to question accepted traditions and values, were to influence considerably the lifestyles they were to adopt in Canada.

2

The majority of Hungarian immigrants to Canada during the interwar years began their "Canadian careers" on a prairie farm. They were directed there by immigration authorities. But farms in the West failed to provide steady employment. On a prairie homestead there was work in the spring from the middle of April on. This was followed by a period of relative inactivity lasting until August, when all hands were needed to bring in the harvest. After September the demand for farm-help rapidly declined and did not resume until next spring. This pattern was imposed by the West's economy. Wheat was supreme, and there was little diversification which could have provided a somewhat different work cycle. Most homesteads offered year-round work for the farmer and his family, but farm workers could put in only a few weeks' or, at best, a few months' work in any one year. At other times they had to find work elsewhere. Thus, the farm worker became a migrant labourer. Even those who managed to acquire a homestead, often had to supplement their income through outside employment. Only after most debts had been paid, did the farmer stand a chance of making it on his own.

Not many Hungarian immigrants to Canada in the 1920s escaped the fate of being migrant labourers at least for a few years. The life stories of those who did not reveal a variety of patterns. As has been mentioned, the immigrant's "career"

usually began on the farm to which he (or she) had been directed by the agency responsible for his placement. Some newcomers stayed at their designated destination; others, who found the wages or working conditions unsatisfactory, looked for farm work elsewhere. Problems rarely arose until September when most farming operations came to an end, and the immigrant became unemployed. The placement agency was no longer concerned with him, now he was on his own. Some people waited and contented themselves with seeking a few days of work here and there in the region to which they had been directed originally. Often they could supplement their summer savings by odd-jobs such as land-clearing and cutting firewood for farmers or townspeople. Unfortunately these jobs paid very little.

Other newcomers found the prospect of having no full-time work until the spring unsettling, and set out to find work in other part of the country. A few found employment in mines, in particular the coal mines of south-western Alberta. As temporary helper and most recent arrival, the newcomer received the least desirable job and was laid off at the first sign of slackening demand for coal. But if his job lasted through the winter, he escaped having to work in the bitterly cold open air and could supply himself and his family with coal picked from heaps of rock scattered around the mine's entrances. For those who failed to find work in the mines, or didn't try to, there was often casual work for the railways, either in track maintenance or on the construction of branchlines. Still others headed for logging camps, logging being generally the only type of work available in the winter on Canada's vast frontiers. Neither railway construction work nor logging appealed to family men unless they were willing to part with their wives and children for many months at a time. And a part of the workers' earnings was consumed by payments they had to make for meals and lodging in the camps.

Still others headed for the cities. They were often followed by those who had first tried the country's mines, railways, or logging camps and had failed either to find jobs or to keep them. In the cities there was a variety of possibilities: wood-splitting or snow-removal around people's homes and shops, construction work when it was not monopolized by members of another ethnic group, and for a fortunate few, even work in factories. Those who couldn't find work, spent their time looking for it and lived

on their meagre savings or on money borrowed from relatives or acquaintances. Expenses were cut by living frugally, with several people sharing a room in a crowded boarding home maintained usually by one of their countrymen. The proprietor of such establishment, known as the *burdosgazda* ("landlord"), was often a fairly recent arrival who supplemented his family's income by subletting part of his home to permanent lodgers and transients. The city often seemed to promise much, but it gave little in the way of employment. However, it offered a life less harsh than that on the frontier, and it also saved the newcomer from the isolation of the labour camps.

In the spring the cycle would start anew as people returned to the land for farm work, and this yearly pattern would go on until broken through the immigrant finding a farm he could start cultivating, or some kind of urban employment he could count on. If anything was certain in this world of uncertainty, it was the fact that nothing was fixed, settled or permanent. Very few could ever feel ensured against having to lead the life of a migrant labourer. The farmer could fail and go bankrupt; in the city, even the surest jobs could disappear; illness, fire or some other calamity could strike, throwing men and families back into a most uncertain type of existence. For many there appeared only one escape: a return to Hungary and the familiar people and ways of the native village. Hundreds of disappointed newcomers chose this course of action.<sup>6</sup>

The basic feature of new Hungarian-Canadian life in the 1920s seems to have been mobility sustained by economic instability and personal restlessness. Repeated migration became part of the lifestyle for many. Often the travelling was senseless and counterproductive. In the early spring of 1928 a public building burned down in Saskatoon. A decision was made to replace it. As soon as this was announced, Hungarian transients converged on the city in the hope of finding well-paying construction jobs.<sup>7</sup> Such usually useless travel helped to consume many a newcomer's savings, or put him deeper into debt. Later, during the Depression, Hungarian transients learned to save the cost of transport by travelling on the roofs of freight-cars, a practice which cost many lives as cold, numbed bodies fell beneath the wheels. Those who were less enterprising resorted to an ancient method of travel: walking. According to a popular myth, one Hungarian in search of a job walked from

Winnipeg to Toronto barefoot, carrying his only pair of boots in his hand. When he found a job, he went back to fetch his family in the same manner.<sup>8</sup>

3

While climate and general economic conditions affected the lives not only of Hungarians but those of other immigrants and most of Canada's poor, Hungarian newcomers had to contend with several handicaps which were more or less peculiar to their kind. One of these was the fact that a large number of Magyar newcomers to Canada came with money borrowed often at usurious lending rates. Consequently, their first concern was to rid themselves and their families of this debt. In doing so, they often missed opportunities to invest in a farm or to start a small business of some sort. In fact, these debts tended to condemn many a newcomer to years of existence as a migrant labourer. Indebtedness could not be simply forgotten as it had been usually contracted against family assets in Hungary.<sup>9</sup> Closely connected to this state of affairs was the fact that many Magyar immigrants were young heads of families who felt obliged to save for the transportation of their wives and children to Canada. Such hopes were often dashed by economic setbacks. Many Hungarian-Canadian men did not reunite with their families until after the Depression or the Second World War.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the most severe handicap new Hungarian arrivals had to contend with was their near-total lack of occupational and language skills. As peasants they had no training in anything but subsistence farming, Hungarian style; and most of them had no knowledge of English. Given the absence of opportunities for learning the language and trades, the acquisition of these skills was a slow and painful process. Furthermore, the lack of knowledge of English and Canadian conditions made the newcomers prey to unscrupulous persons, often of their own nationality, who took advantage of the ignorance of the newly arrived. Older residents of the country would take money from newcomers in return for promises of suitable employment, but the jobs were rarely delivered. Also common was the practice by foremen in mines and factories, and on construction sites, to take bribes when new help was being hired, and to go on exacting a tribute from workers whose continued employment lay within their discretion. Another type

of fraud perpetrated on new arrivals was to promise them passage to the United States, where conditions allegedly were better. The victims were made to pay handsomely and were taken near the border but not across it, or worse, were allowed to fall into the hands of American authorities. A less nefarious, though often equally effective way of helping newcomers to part with their savings was for their *burdosgazda* to provide illegal alcohol for them along with their meals and lodging. In 1929 it was estimated that such a practice could cost a boarder an extra \$15 to \$20 a week. It must be stated that such an arrangement was not entirely the fault of the landlord. Some boarders preferred "wet" boarding houses to "dry" ones, and the pressure to provide drinks was there.<sup>11</sup>

4

The difficulties of New Canadian life were not confined to the male members of the group, just as immigration was not restricted to them. The fact is that, during the height of the post-1924 influx of newcomers, several thousand women came to Canada from Hungary. Most of them arrived to join their husbands or other close relatives. Others came as single persons under Canada's scheme of admitting female domestics. These people were recruited to work as household servants in the Canadian West. After their arrival, they were placed on farmsteads where they were expected to help with housekeeping and other chores such as milking. The scheme did not work without difficulties and disappointments. Some Hungarian arrivals did not know, or refused to accept, what awaited them. A few were not familiar with most aspects of domestic work on the farm. Many seem to have come with the conviction that they could avoid becoming servants and could find employment as sales clerks or factory workers in the cities. In 1930, the Hungarian consul in Winnipeg complained to authorities in Budapest that in 1929 there had been an unusually large number of difficulties in regard to Hungarian female domestics. Many of them had abandoned their assigned jobs. Others did not even show up in their places of destination but insisted on staying in Winnipeg, which offered few if any employment opportunities.<sup>12</sup>

It appears then that the importation of female domestics from Hungary was no more successful a scheme from the immigrants'



point of view than the admission of agricultural workers. Perhaps it was an unreasonable expectation on the part of Canadian policy-makers to suppose that young, unmarried women, usually without any language skills and often without other appropriate skills as well, would take to the demanding life and isolation of prairie homesteads. The whole programme, it seems, added much to human misery and contributed to the influx of unemployed, and in some respects unemployable, people into the cities.

5

Despite the immigration of hundreds of female domestics, most of Canada's Hungarian communities were drastically short of women, especially those of marriageable age. This condition arose as a result of the tradition of young males migrating first, a practice which was responsible for the Hungarian-Canadian ethnic group's skewed demographic structure. The fact was that in most contemporary Hungarian-Canadian communities, young males predominated. The situation was worst in the regions of "new" Hungarian settlement. In Ontario, for example, three out of every five Hungarian males were between the ages of 25 to 39, while in the 30 to 39 age group, men outnumbered women almost three to one.<sup>13</sup>

The predominance of young adult males in the Hungarian-Canadian population meant that many men were denied the blessings of family life, unless they were willing and able to marry outside of their group. No doubt, the quality of life for those Hungarian males who could not marry Hungarian women, or anyone at all, suffered. It may be of interest that the abundance of young adult males, combined with the scarcity of women, had unusual effects on marriage practices and fertility rates. First of all, more Hungarian women were married than females of any other ethnic group, with the exception of Canada's East Asian residents. Furthermore, Hungarian Canadian girls married at a younger age. Close to 13 percent of girls in the 15 to 19 age bracket were married according to the 1931 census. This compared with the national average of slightly over 5 percent, and exceeded by a wide margin the figures for all immigrant groups.<sup>14</sup> The high marriage rates for women, combined with a greater than average tendency for early marriage, and the youthfulness of the male population, resulted

in very high fertility rates for the Hungarian group. Magyar-Canadian society's 6,186 married women in the 15 to 44 age bracket bore an estimated 1,271 children a year, a remarkable figure which was topped only by mothers of Yugoslav and Chinese background, and French-Canadians.<sup>15</sup> It seems then, that while many Hungarian-Canadian men, especially recent arrivals, were denied the blessings of family life, others were busy establishing families almost as if they had to assume responsibility for their ethnic group's numerical growth.

6

The lifestyle of a large section of the new Hungarian-Canadian society was not conducive to the development of any meaningful community life. Hungarian groupings in most cities were made up of transients. There were some rural enclaves in which, for a few years until the Depression struck, Hungarian homesteaders could sustain some form of social life. Most of these were in Saskatchewan, but there were some in Alberta and Manitoba also. Little is known about most of these Hungarian settlements and the community life in them. Much better known is the social activity which was developed by the new urban grouping of Hungarian Canadians.

The style of Hungarian-Canadian social life in cities like Montreal and Toronto was greatly influenced by economic realities. No statistics exist regarding the disposable income of Magyars in the big cities, but there is every reason to believe that they earned much less than the estimated \$1,500 a year needed to keep a family out of poverty.<sup>16</sup> But the lack of adequate financial resources did not mean that social life could not be at times rich and satisfying for the participants.

The new Hungarian-Canadian society's community life revolved around existing or newly established religious or lay organizations. One grouping whose activities are well known, are the Protestants of Montreal. Along with the start of their religious work in 1926, cultural and educational efforts were undertaken. English classes were organized and a library was established with books donated by the Government of Hungary. From 1928 on, an active social life developed, supplementing the religious and cultural work started earlier. Social functions included dinners, dances, plays, picnics, bazaars, and exhibitions of embroidery.<sup>17</sup> Similar activities were carried on by the city's

Roman Catholic Magyars and the members of two lay organizations, the Hungarian Social Club and the Székely Club. Occasionally, larger projects, such as concerts or musical productions, were undertaken jointly with most if not all of these groups and clubs participating. Besides the social activities, two other, closely related ethnic enterprises were initiated: Hungarian school for children and soccer matches for sports-minded youths. The highlight of the group's annual community routine came with the celebration of March 15th, Hungary's national day. The focal points of most of these activities were the churches and a club-room right on St. Laurent Boulevard. Another place of gathering was the Hungarian Consulate on St. Catherines Street. Here, immigrants exchanged stories of their fortunes or misfortunes as they arranged for the transportation of family members to Canada or, in the case of the disappointed, their own return to Hungary. In Montreal, Hungarian presence was noticeable even to the casual passer-by. In the St. Laurent Boulevard - Pine Street area there were Hungarian shops with Magyar signs and billboards on them.<sup>18</sup>

In Toronto active social life developed somewhat later. There, one typically New Canadian organization was the Hungarian Roman Catholic Circle. Established in the fall of 1929, it soon embarked on the holding of regular meetings, dances and English classes in a large room rented in a house on Beverley Street. For some time, the club prospered in every way except financially. Its membership quickly grew from eighteen to nearly one hundred. Public lectures were arranged. In the summer there were ice cream parties and picnics. A small library was started. Next, a house was rented with enough room for larger English classes, dances and even for amateur theatrical productions. The home became the hub of Hungarian social and cultural activity in Toronto. Some functions were held jointly with the city's Magyar Reformed congregation. Other times the dance-hall was rented to another recently established institution, the Hungarian Club, or to a visiting theatrical troupe from Hamilton. For more casual entertainment, magazines, chess-sets, etc. were acquired and a billiard table was rented.<sup>19</sup>

At the time, most of Toronto's Hungarians lived within walking distance of Beverley Street. The area, bounded by Queen and College Streets on the south and north sides respectively, and extending a couple of blocks both east and west, was

inhabited by several East European immigrant groupings. It never became a "little Hungary" the way other sections of the city became "Chinatowns" or "little Italies". Nevertheless, it served as the "home" area of a relatively compact Magyar group, perhaps geographically the most concentrated ever created by Hungarians in Toronto. The district had seen better days, but with the original owners gone to more fashionable sections of the city, the Beverley Street district became a residential area with large, deteriorating rooming houses. In time, the adjoining business districts, located along Queen Street, Spadina Avenue and College Street, also became ethnicized through the establishment of ethnic businesses and institutions on them. In the case of the Hungarians this process took place partly after the migration of Hungarian residents out of the Beverly Street area had started.<sup>20</sup>

7

The new Hungarian-Canadian society was more heterogeneous than the old one had been. In the first place, the social composition of the immigration stream of the 1920s was more complex. Secondly, most of the new arrivals were better educated, public education having made some advances in Hungary since the turn of the century. The new arrivals often had a richer life experience: most of them had served in the war, had travelled, and had been exposed to new ideas and ideologies. Some of them even used "big words" unintelligible to the old-timers.<sup>21</sup> Not surprisingly, the differences in outlook lead to a sociocultural chasm between the new and earlier immigrants. The newcomers, in a typical fashion, resented the material success of the previous arrivals, especially when contrasted with their own apparent lack of progress. At the same time, the older residents disliked what they considered to be "lack of perseverance" on the part of the newcomers. Recounting the great difficulties they had to overcome in their own time, they often reproached their newly-arrived countrymen for their desire to "get rich quickly" and reluctance to do backbreaking physical labour. But the old immigrants' greatest distrust seems to have been directed against the new immigration's gentry and middle-class elements, some members of which tended to treat their lower-class countrymen with condescension, yet tried to act as their leaders and to make a living from them as ticket agents

and insurance salesmen. This situation often gave rise to misunderstandings, and caused ill-feelings toward the “men in trousers” (*nadrágos emberek*), and “gentlemen rogues” (*úri csirkefogók*).<sup>22</sup>

Closely related to this issue of intra-ethnic social disharmony was the problem of leadership within the ethnic grouping. People with good education were rare among the old immigrants. Among the new arrivals they were more common, but before these could rise to positions of leadership they had to earn the trust of their countrymen and acquire a familiarity with Canadian conditions. The absence of capable and tactful individuals who had a good command of English and could have acted as effective spokesmen for their ethnic group in influential Canadian circles was a definite disadvantage for Hungarian-Canadian society. Indicative of the dearth of qualified Hungarian-Canadian professionals is the fact that a search by the Hungarian Consulate of Montreal in 1930 produced only one practicing Magyar-Canadian physician in all of Central Canada (Miklos Sole /Zóla?/ of Hamilton). Three years later a well-informed Hungarian-Canadian newspaperman had reason to complain about the utter lack of Canadian-trained Hungarian lawyers in the country.<sup>23</sup>

Although some students of Hungarian affairs have made various generalizations about the “inability” of Hungarians to provide effective political leadership for their own kind, no convincing evidence has been produced that this is really the case. Hungarian-Canadian society’s failure to produce good leadership appears to have been the result of certain specific causes. Canada’s “agriculturalist only” admission policy restricted the entry of educated, good calibre leaders into the country; and the lifestyle of most old immigrants was not conducive to preparing children for positions of influence and leadership. General conditions existing within most newly established Hungarian-Canadian groupings — especially the lack of residential stability — also hindered the emergence of effective leadership. With the passage of years, leaders did emerge. The fact that they failed to produce the calibre of leadership their fellow Hungarian Canadians expected of them (or they of themselves), was, as shall be seen below, not so much the result of their group’s inherent social or psychological weaknesses but of the brutal conditions which Hungarian Canadians had to face at

the time, and especially, during the Great Depression.

8

Problems plaguing individual Hungarian immigrants in particular, and the Hungarian ethnic group in general, on the eve of the Depression, were numerous. Most newcomers had no steady jobs, no savings, no easily marketable skills, no opportunities for a decent social life, not even a reasonable chance to be reunited with their loved ones or, in the case of single men, of marrying a girl of their own nationality. As a group, the Hungarian-Canadian suffered from increased geographic dispersal and social disharmony. All these problems were exacerbated by the economic slump which began in the fall of 1929.

The first to feel the impact of bad times were the migrant farm workers of the West. These people had their share of difficulties even before 1930, but the Depression made their lot even more miserable. Evidence indicates that their situation became appreciably worse right at the outset of the crisis, during the winter of 1929-30. In his May, 1930 report to Budapest on unemployment among Hungarians in the West, Winnipeg consul István Scheffbeck talked of people who had been unemployed for five to six months, and even of some who had not worked for eight. He explained that the difficulties of the West's wheat economy during 1929 had led to decreased railway traffic and the ending of railway construction work in the northern prairie regions. Manufacturers also curtailed their operations and some of them closed down for months during the winter. The result was wide-scale unemployment. Some of the unemployed found work through municipal relief projects or in bush-clearing, but none of these jobs lasted longer than three or four weeks. In the spring the situation became worse. With the end of the winter's forest-clearing operations, thousands of unemployed flocked to the cities. They were soon joined by the usual spring wave of fresh arrivals from Europe. Unlike in previous years, when the crowds of migrant workers dispersed to work on farms and railway construction sites, in the spring of 1930 most of them remained unemployed.<sup>24</sup>

What happened in the spring of 1930 was to repeat itself for almost a whole decade, the only substantial difference being that, after 1931, the ranks of the unemployed were no longer swelled each spring by masses of fresh arrivals from overseas as Ottawa

had closed Canada's gates to most types of immigrants. Nevertheless, the number of unemployed continued to grow for some years as idle farm workers were joined by others whom the economic crisis deprived of their jobs or livelihood. Many of these were Hungarians who had taken up farming during the 1920s or even earlier. The fact was that the Depression dealt a particularly severe blow to the West's farm economy. The prices of agricultural produce became so low that it did not pay to raise crops. In 1932 wheat sold for as low as 34 cents a bushel. The price of firewood, a staple product of new homesteads in some northern regions, was so low that it was not worth transporting it to nearby towns and cities. In addition to the low prices, many areas of the prairies were afflicted by natural calamities such as prolonged drought, plagues of grasshoppers and soil erosion due to wind action. In some regions farmers suffered nine successive years of total or near-total crop failures.<sup>25</sup> The results were disastrous. Farmers in debt were unable to meet their obligations. Mortgages were foreclosed and settlers had to abandon their homesteads. Thousands of Hungarians drifted away from prairie farms and sought a better life in other regions of the country, often in the big cities.

9

Conditions were not better in most urban centres either. In those days there were no federally financed welfare programmes. In most cases, relief was provided by municipalities. These faced the problem of having to care for more and more unemployed at a time when fewer and fewer people were able to pay municipal taxes. To prevent the influx of unemployed from places where no relief could be provided, municipalities tried to keep out newcomers and to restrict relief to long-term residents. As early as June of 1930, Winnipeg's city council began insisting that unemployed with less than a year's residence should be expelled, and non-citizens on welfare should be deported from Canada.<sup>26</sup> Such attitudes made the lot of the recently arrived migrant worker very difficult. But even those who qualified for relief had a tough time. They received nothing more than handouts of food from public food depots, or food and rent vouchers. Still other city residents managed to find a few weeks of work each year which provided a meagre living for their families. A very few, mainly blue-collar workers whose firms

did not go bankrupt, succeeded in hanging on to a job. They were truly lucky. Even with low incomes — wages were often cut during the Depression — they could provide for their loved ones and even save for a piece of real estate or a farm which in those days could often be bought for very little money.<sup>27</sup>

Whether unemployed or not, on relief or not, everyone lived frugally. Although at first it was believed that things would soon get better, after years of increasing unemployment, people began to believe that economic depression was here to stay. Accordingly, they tried to get by with spending as little money as possible. They lived in crowded, unheated houses, and bought only the most basic necessities. They walked to and from work or church even if it took them hours to do so, rather than spend five cents on streetcars. They even denied themselves the chance to get warmed up by going to a movie in a heated movie theatre, because it cost ten to fifteen cents to do so.<sup>28</sup>

While many of the economic hardships affected immigrant and native born alike, Hungarians often faced problems not shared by Canadians. As recent arrivals they were first to be fired and last to be rehired when it came to employment. As has been mentioned, many of them had come to Canada on borrowed money and had left their families in Hungary. Those among them who had not paid their debts and had not brought out their wives (and children in some cases) before the onset of bad times, faced the prospect of losing their collateral (often a piece of family real estate in Hungary) and no reunion with their loved ones.<sup>29</sup>

## 10

Still another threat that confronted the recent arrival was deportation from Canada if he was found to be a public charge. Not being able to find work, and forbidden to apply for relief, many recent Hungarian Canadians found themselves in a desperate situation. Some solved it by deliberately going on municipal relief and thereby affecting their own deportation to Hungary. Conditions during the Depression were miserable there also, but in the Hungarian countryside people could at least expect to avoid actual starvation. Official statistics give an indication of the size of this more or less involuntary movement back to Hungary. Before the economic crisis, about two dozen Hungarian immigrants were deported from Canada each year (at



the expense of the shipping companies), for various reasons ranging from ill-health to criminality. This was not a large figure considering that in 1929 some fifteen hundred people were returned to the United Kingdom. But in 1930 the figures for Hungarians began to climb. In that year 31 of them were deported; in the next year 121, and in 1932 the number of Magyar deportees reached an all-time high, 170. 86 of these were convicted of having accepted relief. In the following year the number of people returned to Hungary declined to 101, and by 1934 the number of deportees had returned to the pre-1929 levels.<sup>30</sup>

There were definite reasons why deportations declined after 1932. By then, those who were least able or least willing to cope with the adversities had been sent back to Hungary or left Canada on their own volition. The federal government was also anxious to find some solution to unemployment. Its principal measure was the establishment in 1932 of camps for the unemployed under the control of the Department of National Defence. In these camps, young men could get board and lodging plus 20 cents a day in return for working on government construction projects often in some remote part of Canada. The scheme did not solve anyone's economic problems, but it kept many desperate men off the streets where they could resort to crime and violence. We don't know how many Hungarians had lived in these camps, but indications are that there were many. We also know that some were happy with their lot while others had complaints. Many did not like the living conditions and were dissatisfied with the 20 cents a day pay. Others charged that "English" camp-dwellers got preferential treatment when it came to getting leave from the camps.<sup>31</sup>

## 11

The effect of these conditions on individuals are obvious. Probably the most powerful motivating force which prompts people to undertake immigration to a foreign land is the hope for a better future. In the case of the vast majority of interwar Hungarian immigrants to Canada, these hopes were bitterly disappointed. Instead of finding prosperity and personal fulfilment in their new homeland, they were faced by a seemingly hopeless struggle for not much more than physical survival. The impact of this circumstance on people's morale must have been devastating.

The bitterness and the anger of so many Hungarian immigrants inevitably affected their organizational life as well. Given the economic status and the geographic dispersal of Canada's Hungarians, and given the fact of their extremely high residential mobility, it is not surprising that Hungarian cultural and religious organizations made little progress in the interwar years, especially during the Depression. Social activities, cultural efforts, and religious organizational drives all suffered: but none of them were so seriously affected as the group's political life. The fact was that the interwar years, and especially the Depression, witnessed the deterioration of Hungarian-Canadian society's intra-group politics. This deterioration was caused mainly by growing ideological division among Hungarian Canadians. The split's origins go back to the 1920s, and were marked by such events as the establishment of a leftist sick-benefit insurance federation (popularly known as the Kossuth Sick-Benefit Alliance), and the launching of a communist press-organ, the *Canadian Hungarian Worker*. Many converts to the communist cause simply dissolved their links with existing Hungarian churches and lay organizations. Others tried to convert their co-ethnics to their newly acquired radical beliefs, while still others went further and strove to turn the various social, economic and political associations into communist ones. When frustrated in their plans, these people often resorted to obstructing these organizations' work, or to slandering their leaders. The results were unfortunate.

The departure of disillusioned members from existing organizations was only a minor loss. By far worse was the impact of the quarrels and struggles which took place within many organizations. These, no doubt, sapped the morale of both leaders and members. The wrangling and acrimony probably made many people disillusioned in organized ethnic life and caused them to stay away from it altogether. One wonders how many second-generation Hungarian Canadians who had no particular feeling about ideology, shied away from Hungarian ethnic functions simply because they were tired and ashamed to see so much bickering and animosity within their ethnic community. There can be little doubt that in this struggle between the radicals and the conservatives, the real loser was neither the left nor the right, but the Hungarian ethnic group as a whole.

The social and economic conditions which existed in Canada in the interwar years had profound impact on the lives and lifestyles of Hungarian immigrants to this country. The hardships which confronted these people affected them both individually and collectively: they caused personal privations and misery, and retarded the development of healthy community life. Economic difficulties, and the social problems that often accompany these, also tended to interfere with the newcomer's ability to adjust to conditions in Canada. Up to about the last years of the Second World War, most Hungarian interwar immigrants to Canada lived in such economic insecurity that they could not make persistent attempt at acquiring proper language skills or learning trades that were marketable in this country. For most of them the learning of anything more than rudimentary English had to be postponed indefinitely. By the time they could have undertaken this, advancing age and an increasingly defeatist attitude to life made systematic language study or job training well-nigh impossible for most of them.

Through their failure to adjust effectively to Canadian conditions, interwar Hungarian immigrants were bound to shortchange Canada. But the poverty and misery experienced by these people also limited their potential to contribute to the development of Hungarian-Canadian society. The sheer inability of most organizations of interwar Hungarians to maintain proper club facilities, or even to buy Hungarian textbooks for their children, undoubtedly prevented the effective enrichment of Hungarian-Canadian community life, lessened the chances of immigrant culture maintenance, and made the transmission of the ethnic heritage to the second generation more difficult. Especially pernicious were the effects of extreme residential mobility, imposed by a high degree of economic uncertainty. The constant turnover of members made the maintenances of immigrant institutions very difficult. The safeguarding of the immigrant heritage is problematic under any circumstances. The forces of assimilation are there even in times of prosperity. But abject poverty, the kind which existed among Hungarians in the 1930s, can be especially damaging to ethnic life and culture.

There is much evidence that many Hungarians — both newcomers and long-term residents of this country — responded to the challenges of the Great Depression with vigour and

determination. Whenever and wherever they could, they supported each other, and tried their best not to forget about the education of their children both as future Canadian citizens and as members of the Hungarian-Canadian community. But they could do this effectively only in their largest colonies. Individuals and families who lived far from these communities, or who were torn from them by economic circumstances, had to cope not only with poverty, but with social isolation as well as cultural privations. They were faced with the prospects of losing their immigrant heritage — including in some cases their native language — without ever having had a reasonable chance to adjust to the social and cultural environment of their new homeland.

### 13

The advent of the Second World War brought an end to the Great Depression in Canada. From about 1941 on, most immigrants could work to their heart's content in Canada's war-related industries. The war brought prosperity and a great improvement in the immigrants' economic standing. After the war, step-by-step, welfare legislation was introduced, reducing the economic insecurity that faced the immigrant poor in the interwar period. As a consequence of these developments the lifestyles of Hungarians in Canada underwent a gradual but drastic change.

Despite the advent of the consumer society, powerful unions, and the welfare state, the effects of nearly two decades of poverty and degradation remained with Hungarian-Canadian society. The "depression mentality" was deeply imbedded in the minds of the vast majority of those who had lived through the 1930s. For example, no amount of post-war prosperity could make up for the anguish suffered by those who had come to Canada with plans to save for the passage of their loved-ones to this country. Although some men were reunited with their families after the war, the psychological scars of two decades of separation remained.

The impact of the pre-1939 political troubles on Hungarian-Canadian organizational life was equally long lasting. Not even the passage of years could heal the ideological rift which had taken place in Hungarian-Canadian society. That split, caused undoubtedly by the socio-economic conditions in Canada before

1939, would stay with Hungarian Canadians for a whole generation.

In the early post-war period two new waves of Hungarians came to Canada. The new arrivals tended to make rapid and effective adjustment to Canadian conditions. Many of them became so-called "successful immigrants." Some of them also looked down on their interwar Hungarian predecessors. They wondered why the "old immigrants" had made such slow adjustment, why they had failed to preserve the purity of their Hungarian culture, and why even their community life was plagued by issues of a bye-gone era. But those who have difficulty in understanding the mentality, the "world" of the interwar immigrants, should keep in mind the vastly different circumstances that moulded the newcomers of the 'twenties and the 'thirties; they should also remember that these earlier immigrants for a very long time led lives and lifestyles that can hardly be compared to anything known to those who came to Canada in the post-war decades.

#### NOTES

1. The only professional scholar to have published widely on the interwar immigrants is the late John Kosa, the author of *Land of Choice: Hungarians in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957). Kosa's books and most of his articles, however, use the sociological rather than the historical approach. It is only recently that the history of the Hungarian-Canadian experience in the interwar years has started to be explored in publications by the author of this study as well as a young historian, Carmela Patrias. See C. Patrias, "Hungarian Immigration to Canada before the Second World War," in Susan M. Papp (ed.), *Hungarians in Ontario*, a double issue of *Polyphony, The Bulletin of the Multicultural History Society of Ontario* 2, Nos. 2-3 (1979-80): 17-44. Also, by the same author, *The Kanadai Magyar Újság and the Politics of the Hungarian Canadian Elite* Occasional Paper in Ethnic and Immigration studies (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1978). My own articles in this field are "Aspects of Hungarian Settlement in Central Canada," in M. L. Kovacs (ed.), *Hungarian Canadian Perspectives: Selected Papers*, a special issue of the *Canadian-American Review of Hungarian Studies* VII, 1 (Spring, 1980): 45-54; and, "In Search of a Hungarian-Canadian Lobby, 1927-1951," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 12, (Winter 1980): 81-96.

2. Many of these stories are told in Jenő Ruzsa's *A kanadai magyarság története / The History of Canada's Hungarians/* (Toronto, 1940). For a journalistic account of Canada's Hungarian communities in the 1920s see Ödön Paizs, *Magyarok Kanadában / Hungarians in Canada/* (Budapest, 1928).

3. The lifestyles of the interwar immigrants in the post-World War II years are discussed in Kosa's book (*cit.*), while life-stories of several of these immigrants are given in Ruzsa's book (*cit.*), and in Linda Dégh's *People in the Tobacco Belt: Four Lives* (Ottawa, 1975).

4. Divisions within the Hungarian ethnic group are discussed in my article "In Search of a Hungarian-Canadian Lobby" (*cit.*).

5. The interviews with the three interwar immigrants featured in Dégh's book (*cit.*) illustrate this point. It should be mentioned that the Treaty of Trianon of 1920 transferred vast Hungarian territories and large Hungarian populations to Rumania, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. These states often encouraged the emigration of their

newly-acquired Hungarian residents. Thousands of these Magyars made it to Canada in the period between 1924 and 1931.

6. This information is based mainly on the biographical sketches provided by Ruzsa (pp. 441-46), and Dégh (Chapters 1, 2 and 4). For the autobiography of a man who spent many years in Alberta's coal-mines see István Tóth, *23 év Kanadában* /23 Years in Canada/ (Budapest, 1961). For stories of disappointed Hungarians see Paizs, pp. 48-53.

7. Consular memorandum, April 28, 1928. Winnipegi Konzulátus (K 139) Külügyminisztériumi Levéltár, Polgári Kori Központi Kormányhatóságok Levéltárai, Magyar Országos Levéltár /Winnipeg Consulate, Ministry of External Affairs Archives, Archives of the Central Authorities of the Bourgeois Era, Hungarian National Archives,/, Budapest, cited hereafter as Consular Records.

8. Béla Bácskai-Payerle, "A Kanadai Magyarság" /Canadian Hungarians/ *Magyar Szemle* 18, (1933): 221. Interviews with Sisters Mary and Columba of the Sisters of Social Service (1973 and 1976), and taped conversations with old-timers in Lethbridge, kindly placed at my disposal by Father S. Molnár of the St. Elizabeth of Hungary Parish in Calgary.

9. Paizs, p. 75.

10. Interview with Sister Mary, *cit.*

11. *Kanadai Magyar Újság* /Canadian Hungarian News/ June 8, 1929. Also, Paizs, p. 51; and Bácskai-Payerle, p. 220.

12. Memorandum, May 28, 1930. Consular Records.

13. Percentages based on figures provided in *Census of Canada*, 1931, Vol. I. table 38.

14. W. Burton Hurd, *Racial Origins and Nativity of the Canadian People*. Census Monograph no. 4 (Ottawa, 1937), table 25.

15. *Ibid.*, tables 73 and 74.

16. Terry Copp, *The Anatomy of Poverty: The Condition of the Working Class in Montreal, 1897-1929* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1924), pp. 40f. The average yearly income for an unskilled labourer in Montreal during the 1930-31 period was \$836. It is safe to suppose that immigrants earned less. In Toronto incomes were slightly higher. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

17. Mihály Fehér, *A montreali Magyar Református Egyház Jubileumi Emlékkönyve, 1926-1966* /The Jubilee Album of the Hungarian Reformed Church of Montreal, 1926-1966/ (Montreal, 1966), pp. 23f.

18. Ruzsa, pp. 308-10. Paizs, p. 47. *KMU* May 26, 1928; March 27, and Dec. 4, 1930.

19. A Torontoi Magyar Katolikus Kör Jegyzőkönyve /Minutes of Meetings of the Toronto Hungarian Catholic Circle/ MS Nov. 24, 1929 and after. St. Elizabeth of Hungary Parish Office, Toronto.

20. John Kosa, "Hungarian Immigrants in North America: Their Residential Mobility and Ecology," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* XXII, 3 (Aug. 1956): 359f.

21. Paizs, pp. 102 and 169.

22. Paizs, pp. 102 and 169. Bácskai-Payerle, p. 220. Ferenc Grob, *Reminiscences* ms, p. 96.

23. Consular memorandum, Sept. 8, 1930. Consular Records. Bácskai-Payerle, p. 221. The lack of Canadian-trained Magyar lawyers was to be remedied somewhat a few years later when Elemér Izsák, a second-generation Hungarian Canadian, became a lawyer in Toronto.

24. Memorandum by Schefbeck (Petényi), May 28, 1930. Consular Records.

25. For a general introduction to conditions in Canada during the 1930s see H. B. Neatby, *The Politics of Chaos, Canada in the Thirties* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1972) Chapter 2. For conditions among Hungarians in northern Saskatchewan see an interview with Sister Mary Schwartz, reported in *KMU*, Sept. 17, 1931.

26. Memorandum by Schefbeck (Petényi), June 11, 1930. Consular Records.

27. According to the Reverend László Borsay, one-time Calvinist minister in Delhi, Ontario, many of the prosperous Hungarian tobacco farmers in that region had purchased their farms during the Depression for less than a thousand dollars. Borsay, *The Origins of the Tobacco District Hungarian Presbyterian Church*, MS (1977),

in my possession.

28. Interview with Sister Mary, *cit.*, Cf. *KMU* June 4, 1931, Sept. 3 and 17, 1931, Dec. 24, 1937.

29. The regulations against poor immigrants bringing out their families were circumvented on some Hungarian circles. In Montreal there was something akin to a "travelling fund," donated by a generous benefactor of Hungarians, which was deposited in the name of a person who wished to bring out his family. Once the sum had served its purpose, it was transferred to the bank account of another immigrant. The scheme had the covert approval of the local Hungarian parish. Interview with Sister Mary, *cit.*

30. Fiscal statements on deportations" in the Records of the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, (RG 26, vol. 16), Public Archives of Canada. According to official Hungarian statistics, 743 people returned from Canada to Hungary in 1932, 444 in 1933, 246 in 1934, 229 in 1935, and 200 in the next year. Thereafter, the number of returnees declined. No statistics are available for the pre-1932 period. Egon Szabady *et al.* (eds.), *Magyarország népesedése a két világháború között* /Hungary's Population between the Two World Wars/ (Budapest: Közgazdasági és Jogi Könyvkiadó, 1965), p. 328.

31. *KMU* Oct. 31, 1933.